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MY NEW HOME

'I'd like to know your sisters that are as little as me's names.'—P. 39. *Front.*

MY·NEW·HOME

by · Mrs·Molesworth

mary Louisa (Stewart)

Illustrated·by
L·Leslie·Brooke

Macmillan·and·Co
London:1894

828
M72 rru

13-303567

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CHAPTER I

WINDY GAP

My name is Helena, and I am fourteen past. I have two other Christian names; one of them is rather queer. It is 'Naomi.' I don't mind having it, as I am never called by it, but I don't sign it often because it is such an odd name. My third name is not uncommon. It is just 'Charlotte.' So my whole name is 'Helena Charlotte Naomi Wingfield.'

I have never been called by any short name, like 'Lena,' or 'Nellie.' I think the reason must be that I am an only child. I have never had any big brother to shout out 'Nell' all over the house, or dear baby sisters who couldn't say 'Helena' properly. And what seems still sadder than having no brothers or sisters, I have never had a mother that I could remember. For mamma died when I was not much

more than a year old, and papa six months before that.

But my history has not been as sad as you might think from this. I was very happy indeed when I was quite a little child. Till I was nine years old I really did not know what troubles were, for I lived with grandmamma, and she made up to me for everything I had not got: we loved each other so very dearly.

I will tell you about our life.

Grandmamma was not at all the sort of person most children think of when they hear of a grandmother in a story. She was not old, with white hair and spectacles and always a shawl on, even in the house, and very old-fashioned in her ways. She did wear caps, at least I *think* she always did, for, of course, she was not *young*. But her hair was very nicely done under them, and they were pretty fluffy things. She made them herself, and she made a great many other things herself—for me too. For, you will perhaps wonder more than ever at my saying what a happy child I was, when I tell you that we were really *very* poor.

I cannot tell you exactly how much or how little we had to live upon, and *most* children would not

understand any the better if I did. For a hundred pounds a year even, sounds a great deal to a child, and yet it is very little indeed for one lady by herself to live upon, and of course still less for two people. And I don't think we had much more than that. Grandmamma told me when I grew old enough to understand better, that when I first came to live with her, after both papa and mamma were dead, and she found that there was no money for me—that was not poor papa's fault; he had done all that could be done, but the money was lost by other people's wrong-doing—well, as I was saying, when grandmamma found how it was, she thought over about doing something to make more. She was very clever in many ways; she could speak several languages, and she knew a lot about music, though she had given up playing, and she might have begun a school as far as her cleverness went. But she had no savings to furnish a large enough house with, and she did not know of any pupils. She could not bear the thought of parting with me, otherwise she might perhaps have gone to be some grand sort of house-keeper, which even quite, *quite* ladies are sometimes, or she might have joined somebody in having a shop. But after a lot of thinking, she settled she would

rather try to live on what she had, in some quiet, healthy, country place, though I believe she did earn some money by doing beautiful embroidery work, for I remember seeing her make lovely things which were never used in our house. This could not have gone on for long, however, as granny's eyes grew weak, and then I think she did no sewing except making our own clothes.

Now I must tell you about our home. It was quite a strange place to grandmamma when we first came there, but *I* can never feel as if it had been so. For it was the first place I can remember, as I was only a year old, or a little more—and children very seldom remember anything before they are three—when we settled down at Windy Gap.

That was the name of our cottage. It is a nice breezy name, isn't it? though it does sound rather cold. And in some ways it *was* cold, at least it was windy, and quite suited its name, though at some seasons of the year it was very calm and sheltered. Sheltered on two sides it always was, for it stood in a sort of nest a little way up the Middlemoor Hills, with high ground on the north and on the east, so that the only winds really to be feared could never do us much harm. It was more a nest than a 'gap,'

for inside, it was so cosy, so very cosy, even in winter. The walls were nice and thick, built of rather gloomy-looking, rough gray stone, and the windows were deep—deep enough to have window-seats in them, where granny and I used often to sit with our books or work, as the inner part of the rooms, owing to the shape of the windows, was rather dark, and the rooms of course were small.

We had a little drawing-room, which we always sat in, and a still smaller dining-room, which was very nice, though in reality it was more a kitchen than a dining-room. It had a neat kitchen range and an oven, and some things had to be cooked there, though there was another little kitchen across the passage where our servant Kezia did all the messy work—peeling potatoes, and washing up, and all those sorts of things, you know. The dining-room-kitchen was used as little as possible for cooking, and grandmamma was so very, very neat and particular that it was almost as pretty and cosy as the drawing-room.

Upstairs there were three bedrooms—a good-sized one for grandmamma, a smaller one beside it for me, and a still smaller one with a rather sloping roof for Kezia. The house is very easy to understand, you

see, for it was just three and three, three upstairs rooms over three downstairs ones. But there was rather a nice little entrance hall, or closed-in porch, and the passages were pretty wide. So it did not seem at all a poky or stuffy house though it was so small. Indeed, one could scarcely fancy a 'Windy Gap Cottage' anything but fresh and airy, could one?

I was never tired of hearing the story of the day that grandmamma first came to Middlemead to look for a house. She told it me so often that I seem to know all about it just as if I had been with her, instead of being a stupid, helpless little baby left behind with my nurse—Kezia was my nurse then—while poor granny had to go travelling all about, house-hunting by herself!

What made her first think of Middlemead she has never been able to remember. She did not know any one there, and she had never been there in her life. She fancies it was that she had read in some book or advertisement perhaps, that it was so very healthy, and dear grandmamma's one idea was to make me as strong as she could; for I was rather a delicate child. But for me, indeed, I don't think she would have cared where she lived, or to live at all, except that she was so very good.

'As long as any one is left alive,' she has often said to me, 'it shows that there is something for them to be or to do in the world, and they must try to find out what it is.'

But there was not much difficulty for grandmamma to find out what *her* principal use in the world was to be! It was all ready indeed—it was poor, little, puny, delicate, helpless *me!*

So very likely it was as she thought—just the hearing how splendidly healthy the place was—that made her travel down to Middlemead in those early spring days, that first sad year after mamma's death, to look for a nest for her little fledgling. She arrived there in pretty good spirits; she had written to a house-agent and had got the names of two or three 'to let' houses, which she at once tramped off from the station to look at, for she was very anxious not to spend a penny more than she could help. But, oh dear, how her spirits went down! The houses were dreadful; one was a miserable sort of genteel cottage in a row of others all exactly the same, with lots of messy-looking children playing about in the untidy strips of garden in front. *That* would certainly not do, for even if the house itself had been the least nice, grandmamma felt sure I

would catch measles and scarlet-fever and hooping-cough every two or three days! The next one was a still more genteel 'semi-detached' villa, but it was very badly built, the walls were like paper, and it faced north and east, and had been standing empty, no doubt, for these reasons, for years. *It* would not do. Then poor granny plodded back to the house agent's again. He isn't only a house agent, he has a stationer's and bookseller's shop, and his name is Timbs. I know him quite well. He is rather a nice man, and though she was a stranger of course, he seemed sorry for grandmamma's disappointment.

'There are several very good little houses that I am sure you would like,' he said to her, 'and one or two of them are very small—but it is the rent. For though Middlemead is scarcely more than a village it is much in repute for its healthiness, and the rents are rising.'

'What are the rents of the smallest of the houses you speak of?' grandmamma asked.

'Forty pounds is the cheapest,' Mr. Timbs answered, 'and the situation of that is not so good. Rather low and chilly in winter, and somewhat lonely.'

'I don't mind about the loneliness,' said grand-

mamma, 'but a low or damp situation would never do.'

Mr. Timbs was looking over his lists as she spoke. Her words seemed to strike him, and he suddenly peered up through his spectacles.

'You don't mind about loneliness,' he repeated. 'Then I wonder———' and he turned over the leaves of his book quickly. 'There *is* another house to let,' he said; 'to tell the truth I had forgotten about it, for it has never been to let unfurnished before; and it would be considered too lonely for all the year round by most people.'

'Are there no houses near?' asked grandmamma. 'I don't fancy Middlemead is the sort of place where one need fear burglars, and besides,' she went on with a little smile, 'we should not have much of value to steal. The silver plate that I have I shall leave for the most part in London. But in case of sudden illness or any alarm of that kind, I should not like to be out of reach of everybody.'

'There are two or three small cottages close to the little house I am thinking of,' said Mr. Timbs, 'and the people in them are very respectable. I leave the key with one of them.'

Then he went on to tell grandmamma exactly

where it was, how to get there, and all about it, and with every word, dear granny said her heart grew lighter and lighter. She really began to hope she had found a nest for her poor little homeless bird—that was *me*, you understand—especially when Mr. Timbs finished up by saying that the rent was only twelve pounds a year, one pound a month. And she *had* made up her mind to give as much as twenty pounds if she could find nothing nice and healthy for less.

She looked at her watch ; yes, there was still time to go to see Windy Gap Cottage and yet get back to the station in time for the train she had fixed to go back by—that is to say, if she took a fly. She has often told me how she stood and considered about that fly. Was it worth while to go to the expense? Yes, she decided it was, for after all if she found nothing to suit us at Middlemead she would have to set off on her travels again to house-hunt somewhere else. It would be penny wise and pound foolish to save that fly.

Mr. Timbs seemed pleased when she said she would go at once—I suppose so many people go to house agents asking about houses which they never take, that when anybody comes who is quite in earnest they feel like a fisherman when he has really

hooked a fish. He grew quite eager and excited and said he would go with the lady himself, if she would allow him to take a seat beside the driver to save time. And of course granny was very glad for him to come.

It was getting towards evening when she saw Windy Gap for the first time, and it happened to be a very still evening—the name hardly seemed suitable, and she said so to Mr. Timbs. He smiled and shook his head and answered that he only hoped if she did come there to live that she would not find the name *too* suitable. Still, though there was a good deal of wind to be *heard*, he went on to explain that the cottage was, as I have already said, well sheltered on the cold sides, and also well and strongly built.

'None of your "paper-mashy," one brick thick, run-up-to-tumble-down houses,' said Mr. Timbs with satisfaction, which was certainly quite true.

The end of it was, as of course you know already, that grandmamma fixed to take it. She talked it all over with Mr. Timbs, who 'made notes,' and promised to write to her about one or two things that could not be settled at once, and then 'with a very thankful heart,' as she always says when she talks of that day, she drove away again off to the station.

The sun was just beginning to think about setting

when she walked down the little steep garden path and a short way over the rough, hill cart-track—for nothing on wheels can come quite close up to the gate of Windy Gap—and already she could see what a beautiful show there was going to be over there in the west. She stood still for a minute to look at it.

'Yes, madam,' said old Timbs, though she had not spoken, 'yes, that is a sight worth adding a five pound note on to the rent of the cottage for, in my opinion. The sunsets here are something wonderful, and there's no house better placed for seeing them than Windy Gap. "Sunset View" it might have been called, I have often thought.'

'I can quite believe what you say,' grandmamma replied, 'and I am very glad to have had a glimpse of it on this first visit.'

Many and many a time since then have we sat or stood together there, granny and I, watching the sun's good-night. I think she must have begun to teach me to look at it while I was still almost a baby. For these wonderful sunsets seem mixed up in my mind with the very first things I can remember. And still more with the most solemn and beautiful thoughts I have ever had. I always fancied when I was *very* tiny that if only we could have pushed away the

long low stretch of hills which prevented our seeing the very last of the dear sun, we should have had an actual peep into heaven, or at least that we should have seen the golden gates leading there. And I never watched the sun set without sending a message by him to papa and mamma. Only in my own mind, of course. I never told grandmamma about it for years and years. But I did feel sure he went there every night and that the beautiful colours had to do with that somehow.

Grandmamma felt as if the lovely glow in the sky was a sort of good omen for our life at Windy Gap, and she felt happier on her journey back in the railway that evening than she had done since papa and mamma died.

She told Kezia and me all about it—you will be amused at my saying she told *me*, for of course I was only a baby and couldn't understand. But she used to fancy I *did* understand a little, and she got into the way of talking to me when we were alone together especially, almost as if she was thinking aloud. I cannot remember the time when she didn't talk to me 'sensibly,' and perhaps that made me a little old for my age. Granny says I used to grow quite grave when she talked seriously, and that I

would laugh and crow with pleasure when she seemed bright and happy. And this made her try more than anything else to *be* bright and happy.

Dear, dear grandmamma—how very, exceedingly unselfish she was! For I now see what a really sad life most people would have thought hers. All her dearest ones gone; her husband, her son and her son's wife—mamma, I mean—whom she had loved nearly, if not quite as much, as if she had been her own daughter; and she left behind when she was getting old, to take care of one tiny little baby girl —and to be so poor, too. I don't think even now I quite understand her goodness, but every day I am getting to see it more and more, even though at one time I was both ungrateful and very silly, as you will hear before you come to the end of this little history.

And now that I have explained as well as I can about grandmamma and myself, and how and why we came to live in the funny little gray stone cottage perched up among the Middlemoor Hills, I will go on with what I can remember myself; for up till now, you see, all I have written has been what was told to me by other people, especially of course by granny.

CHAPTER II

AT THE FOOT OF THE LADDER

No, perhaps I was rather hasty in saying I could now go straight on about what I remember myself. There are still a few things belonging to the time before I can remember, which I had better explain now, to keep it all in order.

I have spoken of grandmamma as being alone in the world, and so she was—as far as having no one *very* near her—no other children, and not any brothers or sisters of her own. And on my mother's side I had no relations worth counting. Mamma was an only child, and her father had married again after *her* mother died, and then, some years after, he died himself, and mamma's half-brothers and sisters had never even seen her, as they were out in India. So none of her relations have anything to do with my story or with *me*.

But grandmamma had one nephew whom she had

been very fond of when he was a boy, and whom she had seen a good deal of, as he and papa were at school together. His name was not the same as ours, for he was the son of a sister of grandpapa's, not of a brother. It was Vandeleur, Mr. Cosmo Vandeleur.

He was abroad when our great troubles came—I forget where, for though he was not a soldier, he moved about the world a good deal to all sorts of out-of-the-way places, and very often for months and months together, grandmamma never heard anything about him. And one of the things that made her still lonelier and sadder when we first came to Windy Gap was that he had never answered her letters, or written to her for a very long time.

She thought it was impossible that he had not got her letters, and almost more impossible that he had not seen poor papa's death in some of the newspapers.

And as it happened he had seen it and he had written to her once, anyway, though she never got the letter. He had troubles of his own that he did not say very much about, for he had married a good while ago, and though his wife was very nice, she was very, *very* delicate.

Still, his name was familiar to me. I can always

remember hearing grandmamma talk of 'Cosmo,' and when she told me little anecdotes of papa as a boy, his cousin was pretty sure to come into the story.

And Kezia used to speak of him too—'Master Cosmo,' she always called him. For she had been a young under-servant of grandmamma's long ago, when grandpapa was alive and before the money was lost.

That is one thing I want to say—that though Kezia was our only servant, she was not at all common or rough. She turned herself into what is called 'a maid-of-all-work,' from being my nurse, just out of love for granny and me. And she was very good and very kind. Since I have grown older and have seen more of other children and how they live, I often think how much better off I was than most, even though my home was only a cottage and we lived so simply, and even poorly, in some ways. Everything was so open and happy about my life. I was not afraid of anybody or anything. And I have known children who, though their parents were very rich and they lived very grandly, had really a great deal to bear from cross or unkind nurses or maids, whom they were frightened to complain of. For children, unless they are *very* spoilt, are not so

ready to complain as big people think. I had nothing to complain of, but if I had had anything, it would have been easy to tell grandmamma all about it at once; it would never have entered my head not to tell her. She knew everything about me, and I knew everything about her that it was good for me to know while I was still so young—more, perhaps, than some people would think a child should know—about our not having much money and needing to be careful, and things like that. But it did not do me any harm. Children don't take *that* kind of trouble to heart. I was proud of being treated sensibly, and of feeling that in many little ways I could help her as I could not have done if she had not explained.

And if ever there was anything she did not tell me about, even the keeping it back was done in an open sort of way. Granny made no mysteries. She would just say simply—

'I cannot tell you, my dear,' or 'You could not understand about it at present.'

So that I trusted her—'always,' I was going to say, but, alas, there came a time when I did not trust her enough, and from that great fault of mine came all the troubles I ever had.

Now I will go straight on.

Have you ever looked back and tried to find out what is really the very first thing you can remember? It is rather interesting—now and then the b— no, I don't mean to speak of them till they come properly into my story—now and then I try to look back like that, and I get a strange feeling that it is all there, if only I could keep hold of the thread, as it were. But I cannot; it melts into a mist, and the very first thing I *can* clearly remember stands out the same again.

This is it.

I see myself—those looking backs always are like pictures; you seem to be watching yourself, even while you feel it is yourself—I see myself, a little trot of a girl, in a pale gray merino frock, with a muslin pinafore covering me nearly all over, and a broad sash of Roman colours, with a good deal of pale blue in it (I have the sash still, so it isn't much praise to my memory to know all about *it*), tied round my waist, running fast down the short steep garden path to where granny is standing at the gate. I go faster and faster, beginning to get a little frightened as I feel I can't stop myself. Then granny calls out—

'Take care, take care, my darling,' and all in a

minute I feel safe—caught in her arms, and held close. It is a lovely feeling. And then I hear her say—

'My little girlie must not try to run so fast alone. She might have fallen and hurt herself badly if granny had not been there.'

There is to me a sort of parable, or allegory, in that first thing I can remember, and I think it will seem to go on and fit into all my life, even if I live to be as old as grandmamma is now. It is like feeling that there are always arms ready to keep us safe, through all the foolish and even wrong things we do—if only we will trust them and run into them. I hope the children who *may* some day read this won't say I am preaching, or make fun of it. I must tell what I really have felt and thought, or else it would be a pretence of a story altogether. And this first remembrance has always stayed with me.

Then come the sunsets. I have told you a little about them already. I must often have looked at them before I can remember, but one specially beautiful has kept in my mind because it was on one of my birthdays.

I think it must have been my third birthday, though granny is half inclined to think it was my fourth. *I* don't, because if it had been my fourth

I should remember *some* things between it and my third birthday, and I don't—nothing at all, between the running into granny's arms, which she too remembers, and which was before I was three, there is nothing I can get hold of, till that lovely sunset.

I was sitting at the window when it began. I was rather tired—I suppose I had been excited by its being my birthday, for dear granny always contrived to give me some extra pleasures on that day—and I remember I had a new doll in my lap, whom I had been undressing to be ready to be put to bed with me. I almost think I had fallen asleep for a minute or two, for it seems as if all of a sudden I had caught sight of the sky. It must have been particularly beautiful, for I called out—

'Oh, look, look, they're lighting all the beauty candles in heaven. Look, Dollysweet, it's for my birfday.'

Grandmamma was in the room and she heard me. But for a minute or two she did not say anything, and I went on talking to Dolly and pretending or fancying that Dolly talked back to me.

Then granny came softly behind me and stood looking out too. I did not know she was there till I heard her saying some words to herself. Of

course I did not understand them, yet the sound of them must have stayed in my ears. Since then I have learnt the verses for myself, and they always come back to me when I see anything very beautiful —like the trees and the flowers in summer, or the stars at night, and above all, lovely sunsets.

But all I heard then was just—

'Good beyond compare,
If thus Thy meaner works are fair'—

and all I *remembered* was—

'. . . beyond compare,
. . . are fair.'

I said them over and over to myself, and a funny fancy grew out of them, when I got to understand what 'beyond' meant. I took it into my head that 'compare' was the name of the hills, which, as I have said, came between us and the horizon on the west, and prevented our seeing the last of the sunset.

And I used to make wonderful fairy stories to myself about the country beyond or behind those hills—the country I called 'Compare,' where something, or everything—for I had lost the words just before, was 'fair' in some marvellous way I could not even picture to myself. For I soon learnt to know that 'fair' meant beautiful—I think I learnt it

first from some of the old fairy stories grandmamma used to tell me when we sat at work.

That evening she took me up in her arms and kissed me.

'The sun is going to bed,' she said to me, 'and so must my little Helena, even though it is her birthday.'

'And so must Dollysweet,' I said. I always called that doll 'Dollysweet,' and I ran the words together as if it was one name.

'Yes, certainly,' said granny.

Then she took my hand and I trotted upstairs beside her, carrying Dollysweet, of course. And there, up in my little room—I had already begun to sleep alone in my little room, though the door was always left open between it and grandmamma's—there, at the ending of my birthday was another lovely surprise. For, standing in a chair beside my cot was a bed for my doll—*so* pretty and cosy-looking.

Wasn't it nice of granny? I never knew any one like her for having *new* sort of ideas. It made me go to bed so very, very happily, and that is not always the case the night of a birthday. I have known children who, even when they are pretty big,

cry themselves to sleep because the long-looked-for day is over.

It did not matter to me that my dolly's bed had cost nothing—except, indeed, what was far more really precious than money—granny's loving thought and work. It was made out of a strong cardboard box—the lid fastened to the box, standing up at one end like the head part of a French bed. And it was all beautifully covered with pink calico, which grandmamma had had 'by her.' Granny was rather old-fashioned in some ways, and fond of keeping a few odds and ends 'by her.' And over that again, white muslin, all fruzzled on, that had once been pinafores of mine, but had got too worn to use any more in that way.

There were little blankets, too, worked round with pink wool, and little sheets, and everything—all made out of nothing but love and contrivance!

It was so delightful to wake the next morning and see Dollysweet in her nest beside me. She slept there every night for several years, and I am afraid after some time she slept there a good deal in the day also. For I gave up playing with dolls rather young—playing with *a* doll, I should say. I found it more interesting to have lots of little ones,

or of things that did instead of dolls—dressed-up chessmen did very well at one time—that I could make move about and act and be anything I wanted them to be, more easily than one or two big dolls.

Still I always took care of Dollysweet. I never neglected her or let her get dirty and untidy, though in time, of course, her pink-and-white complexion faded into pallid yellow, and her bright hair grew dull, and, worst of all—after that I never could bear to look at her—one of her sky-blue eyes dropped, not out, but *into* her hollow head.

Poor old Dollysweet!

The day after my third birthday grandmamma began to teach me to read. *I* couldn't have remembered that it was that very day, but she has told me so. I had very short lessons, only a quarter of an hour, I think, but though she was very kind, she was very strict about my giving my attention while I was at them. She says that is the part that really matters with a very little child—the learning to give attention. Not that it would signify if the actual things learnt up to six or seven came to be forgotten—so long as a child knows how to learn.

At first I liked my lessons very much, though I

must have been a rather tiresome child to teach. For I would keep finding out likenesses in the letters, which I called 'little black things,' and I wouldn't try to learn their names. Grandmamma let me do this for a few days, as she thought it would help me to distinguish them, but when she found that every day I invented a new set of likenesses, she told me that wouldn't do.

'You may have one likeness for each,' she said, 'but only if you really try to remember its name too.'

And I knew, by the sound of her voice, that she meant what she said.

So I set to work to fix which of the 'likes,' as I called them, I would keep.

'A' had been already a house with a pointed roof, and a book standing open on its two sides, and a window with curtains drawn at the top, and the wood of the sash running across half-way, and a good many other things which you couldn't see any likeness to it in, I am sure. But just as I was staring at it again, I saw old Tanner, who lived in one of the cottages below our house, settling his double ladder against a wall.

I screamed out with pleasure—

'I'll have Tan's ladder,' I said, and so I did. 'A' was always Tan's ladder after that. And a year or two later, when I heard some one speak of the 'ladder of learning,' I felt quite sure it had something to do with the opened-out ladder with the bar across the middle.

After all, I have had to get grandmamma's help for some of these baby memories. Still, as I *can* remember the little events I have now written down, I suppose it is all right.

CHAPTER III

ONE AND SEVEN

I WILL go on now to the time I was about seven years old. 'Baby' stories are interesting to people who know the baby, or the person that once was the baby, but I scarcely think they are very interesting to people who have never seen you or never will, or, if they do, would not know it was you!

All these years we had gone on quietly living at Windy Gap, without ever going away. Going away never came into my head, and if dear grandmamma sometimes wished for a little change—and, indeed, I am sure she must have done—she never spoke of it to me. Now and then I used to hear other children, for there were a few families living near us, whose little boys and girls I very occasionally played with, speak of going to the sea-side in the summer, or to stay with uncles and aunts or other relations in London in the winter, to see the pantomimes and

the shops. But it never struck me that anything of that sort could come in my way, not more than it ever entered my imagination that I could become a princess or a gipsy or anything equally impossible.

Happy children are made like that, I think, and a very good thing it is for them. And I was a very happy child.

We had our troubles, troubles that even had she wished, grandmamma could not have kept from me. And I do not think she did wish it. She knew that though the *background* of a child's life should be contented and happy, it would not be true teaching or true living to let it believe any life can be without troubles.

One trouble was a bad illness I had when I was six — though this was really more of a trouble to granny and Kezia than to me. For I did not suffer much pain. Sometimes the illnesses that frighten children's friends the most do not hurt the little people themselves as much as less serious things.

This illness came from a bad cold, and it *might* have left me delicate for always, though happily it didn't. But it made granny anxious, and after I got better it was a long time before she could feel easy-minded about letting me go out without being

tremendously wrapped up, and making sure which way the wind was, and a lot of things like that, which are rather teasing.

I might not have given in as well as I did had it not happened that the winter which came after my illness was a terribly severe one, and my own sense—for even between six and seven children *can* have some common sense — told me that nothing would be easier than to get a cough again if I didn't take care. So on the whole I was pretty good.

But those months of anxiety and the great cold were very trying for grandmamma. Her hair got quite, *quite* white during them.

These severe winters do not come often at Middlemoor; not very often, at least. We had two of them during the time we lived there, 'year in and year out,' as Kezia called it. But between them we had much milder ones, one or two quite wonderfully mild, and others middling—nothing really to complain of. Still, a very tiny cottage house standing by itself is pretty cold during the best of winters, even though the walls were thick. And in wet or stormy days one does get tired of very small rooms and few of them.

But the year that followed that bitter winter

brought a pleasant little change into my life—the first variety of the kind that had come to me. I made real acquaintance at last with some other children.

This was how it began.

I was seven, a little past seven, at the time.

One morning I had just finished my lessons, which of course took more than a quarter of an hour now, and was collecting my books together, to put them away, when I heard a knock at the front door.

I was in the drawing-room—*generally*, especially in winter, I did my lessons in the dining-room. For we never had two fires at once, and for that reason we sat in the dining-room in the morning if it was cold, though granny was most particular always to have a fire in the drawing-room in the afternoon. I think now it was quite wonderful how she managed about things like that, never to fall into irregular or untidy ways, for as people grow old they find it difficult to be as active and energetic as is easy for younger ones. It was all for my sake, and every day I feel more and more grateful to her for it.

Never once in my life do I remember going into the dining-room to dinner without first meeting grandmamma in the drawing-room, when a glance

would show her if my face and hands had been freshly washed and my hair brushed and my dress tidy, and upstairs again would I be sent in a twinkling if any of these matters were amiss.

But this morning I had had my lessons in the drawing-room; to begin with, it was not winter now, but spring, and not a cold spring either; and in the second place, Kezia had been having a baking of pastry and cakes in the dining-room oven, and granny knew my lessons would have fared badly if my attention had been disturbed every time the cakes had to be seen to.

I was collecting my books, I said, to carry them into the other room, where there was a little shelf with a curtain in front on purpose for them, as we only kept our nicest books in the drawing-room, when this rat-a-tat knock came to the door.

I was very surprised. It was so seldom any one came to the front door in the morning, and, indeed, not often in the afternoon either, and this knock sounded sharp and important somehow. Though I was still quite a little girl I knew it would vex grandmamma if I tried to peep out to see who it was—it was one of the things she would have said 'no lady should ever do'—and I could not bear her

to think I ever forgot how even a very small lady should behave.

The only thing I could do was to look out of the side window, not that I could see the door from there, but I had a good view of the road where it passed the short track, too rough to call a road, leading to our own little gate.

No cart or carriage could come nearer than that point; the tradesmen from Middlemoor always stopped there and carried up our meat or bread or whatever it was—not very heavy basketfuls, I suspect—to the kitchen door, and I used to be very fond of standing at this window, watching the unpacking from the carts.

There was no cart there to-day, but what *was* there nearly took my breath away.

'Oh, grandmamma,' I called out, quite forgetting that by this time Kezia must have opened the door; 'oh, grandmamma, do look at the lovely carriage and ponies.'

Granny did not answer. She had not heard me, for she was in the dining-room, as I might have known. But I had got into the habit of calling to her whenever I was pleased or excited, and generally, somehow or other, she managed to hear. And

I could not leave the window, I was so engrossed by what I saw.

There was a girl in the carriage, to me she seemed a grown-up lady. She was sitting still, holding the reins. But I did not see the figure of another lady which by this time had got hidden by the house, as she followed the little groom whom she had sent on to ask if Mrs. Wingfield was at home, meaning at first, to wait till he came back. I heard her afterwards explaining to grandmamma that the boy was rather deaf and she was afraid he had not heard her distinctly, so she had come herself.

And while I was still gazing at the carriage and the ponies, the drawing-room door, already a little ajar, was pushed wide open and I heard Kezia saying she would tell Mrs. Wingfield at once.

'Mrs. Nestor; you heard my name?' said some one in a pleasant voice.

I turned round.

There stood a tall lady in a long dark green cloak, she had a hat on, not a bonnet, and I just thought of her as another lady, not troubling myself as to whether she was younger or older than the one in the carriage, though actually she was her mother.

I was not shy. It sounds contradictory to say so, but still there is truth in it. I had seen too few people in my life to know anything about shyness. And all I ever had had to do with were kind and friendly. And I remembered 'my manners,' as old-fashioned folk say.

I clambered down from the window-seat, and stroked my pinafore, which had got ruffled up, and came forward towards the lady, holding out my hand. I had no need to go far, for she had come straight in my direction.

'Well, dear?' she said, and again I liked her voice, though I did not exactly think about it, 'and are you Mrs. Wingfield's little girl?'

'My name is Helena Charlotte Naomi Wingfield,' I said, very gravely and distinctly, 'and grandmamma is Mrs. Wingfield.'

Mrs. Nestor was smiling still more by this time, but she smiled in a nice way that did not at all give me any feeling that she was making fun of what I said.

'And how old are you, my dear?—let me see, you have so many names! which are you called by, or have you any short name?'

I shook my head.

'No, only "girlie," and that is just for grandmamma to say. I am always called "Helena."'

'It is a very pretty name,' said my new friend. 'And how old are you, Helena?'

'I am past seven,' I said. 'My birthday comes in the spring, in March. Have you any little girls, and are any of them seven? I would like to know some little girls as big as me.'

'I have lots,' said Mrs. Nestor. 'One of them is in the pony-carriage outside. I daresay you can see her from the window.'

I think my face must have fallen.

'Oh,' I said, disappointedly. 'She's a lady.'

'No, indeed,' said Mrs. Nestor, now laughing outright; 'if you knew her, or when you know her, as I hope you will soon, I'm afraid you will think her much more of a tomboy than a lady. Sharley is only eleven, though she is tall. Her name is Charlotte, like one of yours, but we call her Sharley; we spell it with an "S" to prevent people calling her "Charley," for she is boyish enough already, I am afraid. Then I have three girls younger—nine, six, and three, and two boys of——'

I was *so* interested—my eyes were very wide open, and I shouldn't wonder if my mouth was too

—that for once in my life I was almost sorry to see grandmamma, who at that moment opened the door and came in.

'I hope Helena has been a good hostess?' she said, after she had shaken hands with Mrs. Nestor, whom she had met before once or twice. 'We have been having a cake baking this morning, and I was just giving some directions about a special kind of gingerbread we want to try.'

'I should apologise for coming in the morning,' said Mrs. Nestor, but grandmamma assured her it was quite right to have chosen the morning. 'Helena and I go out in the afternoon whenever the weather is fine enough, and I should have been sorry to miss you. Now, my little girl, you may run off to Kezia. Say good-bye to Mrs. Nestor.'

I felt very disappointed, but I was accustomed to obey at once. But Mrs. Nestor read the disappointment in my eyes: that was one of the nice things about her. She was so 'understanding.'

She turned to grandmamma.

'One of my daughters is in the pony-carriage,' she said. 'Would you allow Helena to go out to her? She would be pleased to see your garden, I am sure.'

'Certainly,' said grandmamma. 'Put on your hat and jacket, Helena, and ask Miss'—she had caught sight of the girl from the window and saw that she was pretty big—'Miss Nestor to walk about with you a little.'

I flew off—too excited to feel at all timid about making friends by myself.

'Call her Sharley,' said Mrs. Nestor, as I left the room. 'She would not know herself by any other name.'

In a minute or two I was running down the garden-path. When I found myself fairly out at the gate, and within a few steps of the girl, I think a feeling of shyness *did* come over me, though I did not myself understand what it was. I hung back a little and began to wonder what I should say. I had so seldom spoken to a child belonging to my own rank in life. And I had not often spoken to any of the poorer children about, as there happened to be none in the cottages near us, and grandmamma was perhaps a little *too* anxious about me, too afraid of my catching any childish illness. She says herself that she thinks she was. But of course I am now so strong and big that it makes it rather different.

I had not much time left in which to grow shy, however. As soon as the girl saw that I was plainly coming towards her she sprang out of the carriage.

'Has mother sent you to fetch me?' she said.

I looked at her. Now that she was out of the carriage and standing, I could see that she was not as tall as grandmamma, or as her own mother, and that her frock was a good way off the ground. And her hair was hanging down her back. Still she seemed to me almost a grown-up lady.

I am afraid her first impression of *me* must have been that I was extremely stupid. For I went on staring at her for a moment or two before I answered. She was indeed opening her lips to repeat the question when I at last found my voice.

'I don't know,' I said. And if she did not think me stupid before I spoke, she certainly must have done so when I did.

'I don't know,' I repeated, considering over what her question exactly meant. 'No, I don't think it was fetching you. I was to ask you—would you like to walk round our garden? And p'raps—your mamma was going to tell me all your names, but grandmamma told me to run away. I'd like to know your sisters that are as little as me's names.'

I remember exactly what I said, for Sharley has often told me since how difficult it was for her not to burst out laughing at the funny way I spoke. But tomboy though she was in some respects, she had a very tender heart, and like her mother she was quick at understanding. So she answered quite soberly—

'Thank you. I should like very much to walk round your garden—though running would be even nicer. I'm not very fond of walking if I can run, and you have got such jolly steep paths and banks.'

I eyed the steep paths doubtfully.

'You hurt yourself a good deal if you run too fast down the paths,' I said. 'The stones are so sharp.'

Sharley laughed.

'You speak from experience,' she said. 'That grass bank would be lovely for tobogganing.'

'I don't know what that is,' I replied.

'We'll show you if you come to see us at home,' she said. 'But I suppose I'd better not try anything like that to-day. You want to know my sisters' names? They are Anna and Valetta and Baby——'

'Never mind about Baby,' I interrupted, rather abruptly, I fear. 'How big is Anna, and—the other one?'

Sharley stood still and looked me well over.

'Do you really mean "big"?' she said, 'or "old"? Anna is nine and Val is six; but as for bigness—Anna is nearly as tall as I am, and Val is a good bit bigger than you.'

I felt and looked nearly ready to cry.

'And I'm past seven,' I said, 'I wish I wasn't so little. It's like being a baby, and I don't care for babies.'

'Never mind,' replied Sharley consolingly, 'you needn't be at all babyish because you're little. One of our boys is very little, but he's not a bit of a baby. I'm sure Val will like to play with you, and so will Anna—and all of us, for that matter.'

I began to think Sharley a very nice girl. I put my hand in hers confidingly.

'I'd like to come,' I said, 'and I'd like to play that funny name down the grass-bank here, if you'll show me how.'

'All right,' she said. 'We'll have to ask leave, I suppose. But you haven't told me your name yet. The children are sure to ask me.'

I repeated it—or them—solemnly.

'"Charlotte"—that's my name,' Sharley remarked.

'I'm never called it,' I said. 'I'm always called Helena.'

Sharley looked rather surprised.

'Fancy!' she said. '*We* all call each other by short names and nicknames and all kinds of absurd names. Anna is generally Nan, and the boys are Pert and Quick—at least those are the names that have lasted longest. I daresay it's partly because they are just a little like their real names—Percival and Quintin.'

'What a great many of you there are!' I said, but Sharley took my remark in perfectly good part, even though I went on to add—'It's like the baker's children—I counted them once, but I couldn't get them right; sometimes they came to nine and sometimes to eleven.'

'Do you mean the baker's on the way to High Middlemoor?' said Sharley. 'Oh yes, it must be them—papa calls them the baker's dozen always. No, we're not as many as that. We are only seven—us four girls, and Pert and Quick, and Jerry, our big brother, who's at school. Dear me, it must be dull to be only one!'

Just then we heard the voices of grandmamma and Sharley's mother coming towards us. And a minute or two later the pony-carriage drove away again, Sharley nodding back friendly farewells.

CHAPTER IV

NEW FRIENDS AND A PLAN

I STOOD looking after it as long as it was in sight. I felt quite strange, almost a little dazed, as if I had more than I could manage to think over in my head. Grandmamma, who was standing behind me, put her hand on my shoulder.

I looked up at her, and I saw that her face seemed pleased.

'Is that a nice lady, grandmamma?' I said.

I do not quite know why I asked about Sharley's mother in that way, for I felt sure she was nice. I think I wanted grandmamma to help me to arrange my ideas a little.

'Very nice, dear,' she said. 'Did you not think she spoke very kindly?'

'Yes, I did, grandmamma,' I replied. I had a rather 'old-fashioned' way of speaking sometimes, I think.

'And her little girl—well, she is not a little girl, exactly, is she?—seems very bright and kind too,' grandmamma went on.

'Yes,' I replied, but then I hesitated. Grandmamma wanted to find out what I was thinking.

'You don't seem quite sure about it?' she said.

'Yes, grandmamma. She is a very kind girl, but she made me feel funny. She has such a lot of brothers and sisters, and she says it must be so dull to be only one. Grandmamma, is it dull to be only one?'

Grandmamma did not smile at my odd way of asking her what I could have told myself, better than any one else. A little sad look came over her face.

'I hope not, dear,' she answered. 'My little girl does not find her life dull?'

I shook my head.

'I love you, grandmamma, and I love Kezia, but I don't know about "dull" and things like that. I think Sharley thinks I'm a very stupid little girl, grandmamma.'

And all of a sudden, greatly to dear granny's surprise and still more to her distress, I burst into tears.

She led me back into the house, and was very kind to me. But she did not say very much. She

only told me that she was sure Sharley did not think anything but what was nice and friendly about me, and that I must not be a fanciful little woman. And then she sent me to Kezia, who had kept an odd corner of her pastry for me to make into stars and hearts and other shapes with her cutters, as I was very fond of doing. So that very soon I was quite bright and happy again.

But in her heart granny was saying that it would be a very good thing for me to have some companions of my own age, to prevent my getting fanciful and unchildlike, and, worst of all, too much taken up with myself.

A few days after that, grandmamma told me that the three Nestor girls were coming twice a week to read French with her. I think I have said already that grandmamma was very clever, very clever indeed, and that she knew several foreign languages. She had been a great deal in other countries when grandpapa was alive, and she could speak French beautifully. So I wasn't surprised, and only very pleased when she told me about Sharley and her sisters. For I was too little to understand what any one else would have known in a moment, that dear granny was going to do this to make a little

more money. My illness and all the things she had got for me—even the having more fires—had cost a good deal that last winter, and she had asked the vicar of our village to let her know if he heard of any family wanting French or German lessons for their children.

This was the reason of Mrs. Nestor's call, and it was because they were going to settle about the French lessons that grandmamma had sent me out of the room. It was not till long afterwards that I understood all about it.

Just now I was very pleased.

'Oh, how nice!' I said, 'and may I play with them after the lessons are done, do you think, grandmamma? And will they ask me to go to their house to tea sometimes? Sharley said they would—at least she nearly said it.'

'I daresay you will go to their house some day. I think Mrs. Nestor is very kind, and I am sure she would ask you if she thought it would please you,' said grandmamma. But then she stopped a little. 'I want you to understand, Helena dear, that these children are coming here really to learn French. So you must not think about playing with them just at first, that must be as their mother likes.'

Grandmamma did not say what she felt in her own mind—that she would not wish to seem to try to make acquaintance with the Nestors, who were very rich and important people, through giving lessons to their children. For she was proud in a right way—no, I won't call it proud—I think dignified is a better word.

But Mrs. Nestor was too nice herself not to see at once the sort of person grandmamma was. She was almost *too* delicate in her feelings, for she was so afraid of seeming to be in the least condescending or patronising to us, that she kept back from showing us as much kindness as she would have liked to do. So it never came about that we grew very intimate with the family at Moor Court—that was the name of their home—I really saw more of the three girls at our own little cottage than in their own grand house.

But as I go on with my story you will see that there was a reason for my telling about them, and about how we came to know them, rather particularly.

The French lessons began the next week. Sharley and her sisters used to come together, sometimes walking with a maid, sometimes driving over in a little pony-cart—not the beautiful carriage

with the two ponies; that was their mother's—but what is called a governess-cart, in which they drove a fat old fellow called Bunch, too fat and lazy to be up to much mischief. When they drove over they brought a young groom with them, but their governess very seldom came. I think Mrs. Nestor thought it would be pleasanter for granny to give the lessons without a grown-up person being there, and Sharley said their governess used that time to give the two boys Latin lessons. Mrs. Nestor would have been very glad if grandmamma would have agreed to teach Pert and Quick French too, but granny did not think she could spare time for it, though a year or two later when Percival had gone to school she did let Quick join what we called the second class.

I should have explained that though I could not read or write French at all well, I could speak it rather nicely, as grandmamma had taken great pains to accustom me to do so since I was quite little.

I think she had a feeling that I might have to be a governess or something of the kind when I was grown-up, and that made her very anxious about my lessons from the beginning of them. And though things have turned out quite differently from that,

I have always been *very* glad that I was well taught from the first. It is such a comfort to me now that I am really growing big to be able to show grandmamma that I am not far back for my age compared with other girls.

Sharley was the first class all by herself, and Nan and Vallie were the second. I did not do any lessons with them, but after each class had had half an hour's teaching we had conversation for another half hour, and when the conversation time began I was always sent for. Grandmamma had asked Mrs. Nestor if she would like that, and Mrs. Nestor was very pleased.

We had great fun at the 'conversation.' You can scarcely believe what comical things the little girls said when they first began to try to talk. Grandmamma sometimes laughed till the tears came into her eyes—I do love to see her laugh—and I laughed too, partly, I think, because she did, for the funny things they said did not seem quite so funny to me, of course, as to a big person.

But altogether the French lessons were very nice and brought some variety into our lives. I think granny and I looked forward to them as much as the Nestor children did.

Grandmamma's birthday happened to come about a fortnight after they began. I told Sharley about it one day when she was out in the garden with me, while her sisters were at their lesson. We used to do that way sometimes, only we had to promise to speak French all the time, so that I really had a little to do with teaching them as well as grandmamma, and to tease me, on these occasions Sharley would call me 'mademoiselle,' and make Nan and Vallie do the same. They used in turn, you see, to be with me while Sharley was with granny.

It was rather difficult to make her understand about grandmamma's birthday, I remember, for she could scarcely speak French at all then, and at last she burst out into English, for she got very interested about it.

'I'll tell Mrs. Wingfield we have been talking English,' she said, 'and I'll tell her it was all my fault. But I must understand what you are saying.'

'It's about grandmamma's birthday,' I said. 'I do so want to make a plan for it.'

Sharley's eyes sparkled. She loved making plans, and so did Vallie, who was very quick and bright about everything, while Nan was rather a sleepy little girl, though exceedingly good-natured. I don't think I *ever* knew her speak crossly.

'I heard something about "fête,"' said Sharley, 'about fête and grandmamma. Why do you call her birthday her "fête"?'

'I didn't,' I replied. '"Fête" doesn't generally mean birthday—it means something else, something about a saint's day. I said I wanted to "fêter" dear granny on her birthday, and I wondered what I could do. Last year I worked a little case in that stiff stuff with holes in, to keep stamps in, and Kezia made tea-cakes. But I can't think of anything I can work for her this year, and tea-cakes are only tea-cakes,' and I sighed.

'Don't look so unhappy,' said Sharley, '*we'll* plan. We're rather short of plans just now, and we always like to have some on hand for first thing in the morning—Val and I do at least. Nan never wakes up properly. Leave it to us, Helena, and the next time we come I'll tell you what we've thought of.'

I had a good deal of faith in Sharley's cleverness in some things, already, though I can't say that it shone out in speaking French. So I promised to wait to see what she and Vallie thought of.

When we went in we told grandmamma that we had been speaking English. I made it up into very

good French, and Sharley said it, which pleased granny.

'And what was it you were so eager about that you couldn't wait to say it, or hear it in French?' she asked Sharley.

We had not expected this, and Sharley got rather red.

'It's a secret,' she blurted out.

Grandmamma looked just a little grave.

'I am not very fond of secrets,' she said. 'And Helena has never had any.'

'Oh yes, I have, grandmamma,' I said. I did not mean to contradict rudely, and I don't think it sounded like that, though it looks rather rude written down. 'I had one this time last year—don't you remember?—about your little stamp case.'

Granny's face brightened up. It did not take very quick wits to put two and two together, and to guess from what I said that the secret had to do with her birthday. And Sharley was too anxious for grandmamma not to be vexed, to think about her having partly guessed the secret.

'Ah, well!' said granny, 'I think I can trust you both.'

'Yes, indeed, you may,' said Sharley. 'There's

nothing about mischief in it, and the only secrets mother's ever been vexed with me about had to do with mischief.'

'Sharley dressed up a pillow to tumble on Pert's head from the top of his door, once,' said Nan in her slow solemn voice, 'and he screamed and screamed.'

'It was because he was such a boasty boy, about never being frightened,' said Sharley, getting rather red. 'But I never did it again. And this secret is quite, quite a different kind.'

I felt very eager for the next French day, as we called them, to come, to hear what Sharley had thought of. I told Kezia about it, and then I almost wished I had not, for she said she did not know that grandmamma would be pleased at my talking about her birthday and 'such like' to strangers.

I think Kezia forgot sometimes how very little a girl I still was. I did not understand what she meant, and all I could say was that the three girls were not strangers to me. Afterwards I saw what Kezia was thinking of, she was afraid of the Nestors sending some present to grandmamma, and that, she would not have liked.

But Mrs. Nestor was too good and sensible for anything of that kind.

When Sharley and Nan and Vallie came the next time, I ran to meet them, full of anxiety to know if they had made any 'plans.' They all looked very important, but rather to my disappointment the first thing Sharley said to me was—

'Don't ask us yet, Helena. We've promised mother not to tell. She's going to come to fetch us to-day, and she's made a lovely plan, but first she has to speak about it to your grandmamma.'

'Then it won't be a surprise,' I began, but Vallie answered before I had time to say any more.

'Oh yes, it will. There's to be a surprise mixed up with it, and we're to settle that part of it all ourselves—you and us.'

I found it very difficult to keep to speaking French that day, I can tell you. And it seemed as if the hour and a half of lessons spread out to twice as much before Mrs. Nestor at last came.

We all ran out into the garden while she went in to talk to grandmamma. They were very kind and did not keep us long waiting, and soon we heard granny calling us from the window. Her face was quite pleased and smiling. I saw in a moment that she was not going to say I should not have spoken of her birthday to the little girls.

'Mrs. Nestor is thinking of a great treat for you—and for me, Helena,' she said. 'And she and I want you to know about it at once, so that you may all talk about it together and enjoy it beforehand as well. Some little bird, it seems, has flown over to Moor Court and told that next Tuesday week will be your old granny's birthday, and Mrs. Nestor has invited us to spend the afternoon of it there. You will like that, will you not?'

I looked up at grandmamma, feeling quite strange. You will hardly believe that I had never in my life paid even a visit of this simple kind.

'Yes,' I whispered, feeling myself getting pink all over, as I knew that Mrs. Nestor was looking at me, 'yes, thank you.'

Then dear little Vallie came close up to me, and said in a low voice—

'Now we can settle about the surprise. Come quick, Helena—the surprise will be the fun.'

And when I found myself alone with the others again, all three of them, even Nan, chattering at once, I soon found my own tongue again, and the strange, unreal sort of feeling went off. They were very simple unspoilt children, though their parents were rich and what I used to call 'grand.' It is quite

a mistake to think that the children who live in very large houses and have ponies and lots of servants and everything they can want are sure to be spoilt. Very often it is quite the opposite. For, if their parents are good and wise, they are *extra* careful not to spoil them, knowing that the sort of trials that cannot be kept away from poorer children, and which are a training in themselves in some ways, are not likely to come to *their* children. I even think now, looking back, that there was really more risk of being spoilt, for me myself, than for Sharley and her brothers and sisters.

Being allowed to be selfish is the real beginning and end of being spoilt, I am quite sure.

The 'surprise' they had thought of was a very simple one, and one that I knew grandmamma would like. It was that we should have tea out-of-doors, in an arbour where there was a table and seats all round. And we were to decorate it with flowers, and a wicker arm-chair was to be brought out for granny, and wreathed with greenery and flowers, to show that she was queen of the feast.

'So it will be a "fête," after all, Helena,' said Sharley.

They were nearly as eager and pleased about it

as I was myself, for they had already learnt to love my grandmamma very dearly.

'There's only one thing,' we kept saying to each other every time we met before the great day, 'it *mustn't* rain. Oh, do let us *hope* it will be fine,—beautifully fine.'

CHAPTER V

A HAPPY DAY

AND it *was* a fine day! Things after all do not always go wrong in this world, though some people are fond of talking as if they did.

That day, that happy birthday, stands out in my mind so clearly that I think I must write a good deal about it, even though to most children there would not seem anything very remarkable to tell. But to me it was like a peep into fairyland. To begin with, it was the very first time in my life that I had ever paid a visit of any kind except once or twice when I had had tea in rather a dull fashion at the vicarage, where there were no children and no one who understood much about them. Miss Linden, the vicar's sister, a very old-maid sort of lady, though she meant to be kind, had my tea put out in a corner of the room by myself, while she and grandmamma had theirs in a regular drawing-room way. They

had muffins, I remember, and Miss Linden thought muffins not good for little girls, and my bread-and-butter was cut thicker than I ever had it at the cottage, and the slice of currant-bread was not nearly as good as Kezia's home-made cake—even the plainest kind.

No, my remembrances of going out to tea at the vicarage were not very enlivening.

How different the visit to Moor Court was!

It began—the pleasure of it at least to me—the first thing when I awoke that morning, and saw without getting out of bed—for my room was so little that I could not help seeing straight out of the window, and I never had the blinds drawn down—that it was a perfectly lovely morning. It was the sort of morning that gives almost certain promise of a beautiful day.

In our country, because of the hills, you see, it isn't always easy to tell beforehand what the weather is going to be, unless you really study it. But even while I was quite a child I had learnt to know the signs of it very well. I knew about the lights and shadows coming over the hills, the gray look at a certain side, the way the sun set, and lots of things of that kind which told me a good deal that a stranger

would never have thought of. I knew there were some kinds of bright mornings which were really less hopeful than the dull and gloomy ones, but there was nothing of that sort to-day, so I curled myself round in bed again with a delightful feeling that there was nothing to be feared from the weather.

I did not dare to get up till I heard Kezia's knock at the door—for that was one of grandmamma's rules, and though she had not many rules, those there *were* had to be obeyed, I can assure you.

I must have fallen asleep again, for the next thing I remember was hearing grandmamma's voice, and there she was, standing beside my bed.

'Oh, granny!' I called out, 'what a shame for you to be the one to wake me on *your* birthday.'

'No, dear,' said grandmamma, 'it is quite right. Kezia hasn't been yet, it is just about her time.'

I sprang up and ran to the table, where I had put my little present for grandmamma the night before, for of course I had got a present for her all of my own, besides having planned the treat with the Nestors.

I remember what my present was that year. It was a little box for holding buttons, which I had

bought at the village shop, and it had a picture of the old, old Abbey Church at Middlemoor on its lid. Grandmamma has that button-box still, I saw it in her work-basket only yesterday. I was very proud of it, for it was the first year I had saved pennies enough to be able to *buy* something instead of working a present for grandmamma.

She did seem so pleased with it. I remember now the look in her eyes as she stooped to kiss me. Then she turned and lifted something which I had not noticed from a chair standing near.

'This is my present for my little girl,' she said, and though I was inclined to say that it was not fair for her to give me presents on her birthday, I was so delighted with what she held out for me to see that I really could scarcely speak.

What do you think it was?

A new frock—the prettiest by far I had ever had. The stuff was white, embroidered by grandmamma herself in sky-blue, in such a pretty pattern. She had sat up at night to do it after I was in bed.

'Oh, grandmamma,' I said, 'how beautiful it is! Oh, may I—' but then I stopped short—'may I wear it to-day?' was what I was going to say. But, 'oh no,' I went on, 'it might get dirtied.'

'You are to wear it to-day, dear,' said grandmamma, 'if that is what you were going to say, so you needn't spoil your pleasure by being afraid of its getting dirtied; it will wash perfectly well, for I steeped the silk I worked it in, in salt and water before using it, to make the colour quite fast. I will leave it here on the back of the chair, and when the time comes for you to get ready I will dress you myself, to be sure that it is all quite right.'

I kept peeping at my pretty frock all the time I was dressing; the sight of it seemed the one thing wanting to complete my happiness. For though Sharley and Nan and Vallie were never too grandly dressed, their things were always fresh and pretty, and I *had* been thinking to myself that none of my summer frocks were quite as nice or new-looking as theirs.

And to-day, though only May, was really summer.

Grandmamma wouldn't let me do very much that morning, as she did not want me to be tired for the afternoon.

'Is it a very long walk to Moor Court?' I asked her.

Grandmamma smiled, a little funnily, I thought afterwards.

'Yes,' she said, 'it is between two and three miles.'

'Then we must set off early,' I said, 'so as not to have to go too fast and be tired when we get there, I don't mind for coming back about being tired; there'll be nothing to do then but go to bed, it'll all be over!' and I gave a little sigh, 'but I don't want to think about its being over yet.'

'We must start at half-past two,' said grandmamma. 'That will be time enough.'

Long before half-past two, as you can fancy, I was quite ready. My frock fitted perfectly, and even Kezia, who was rather afraid of praising my appearance for fear of making me conceited, said with a smile that I did look very nice.

I quite thought so myself, but I really think all my pride was for grandmamma's frock.

I settled myself in the window-seat looking towards the road, as I have explained.

'Stay there quietly,' grandmamma said to me, 'till I call you.'

And again I noticed a sort of little twinkle in her eyes, of which before long I understood the reason. I must have been sitting there a quarter of an hour at least when I thought I heard wheels coming. It wasn't the usual time for the butcher or baker, or

any of the cart-people, as I called them, and wheels of any other kind seldom came our way. So I looked out with great curiosity to see what it could be.

To my astonishment, there came trotting along the short bit of level road leading to our own steep path the two ponies and the pretty pony-carriage that had so delighted me the first time I saw them.

Sharley was driving, the little groom behind her. But this time my first feeling was certainly not one of pleasure. On the contrary I started in dismay.

'Oh dear,' I thought, 'there's something the matter, and Sharley has come herself to say we can't go.'

I rushed upstairs, the tears already very near my eyes.

'Granny, granny,' I exclaimed, 'the pony-carriage has come and Sharley's there! I'm sure she's come to tell us we can't go.'

My voice broke down before I could say anything more. Grandmamma was coming out of her room quite ready, and even in the middle of my fright I could not help thinking how nice she looked in her pretty dark gray dress and black lace cloak, which, though she had had it a great, great many years, always seemed to me rich and grand enough for the Queen herself to wear.

'My dear little girl,' she said, 'you really must not get into the way of fancying misfortunes before they come. It is a very bad habit. Why shouldn't Sharley have come to fetch us? Don't you think it would be nicer to drive to Moor Court than to walk all that way along the dusty road?'

'Oh, granny,' I cried, and my tears, if they were there, vanished away like magic. 'Oh, granny, that would be too lovely. But are you quite sure?'

'Quite,' said grandmamma, 'I promised to keep it a secret to please Sharley, as she is so fond of surprises. Run down now to meet her and tell her we are quite ready.'

How perfectly delightful that drive was! I sat with my back to the ponies, on the low seat opposite grandmamma and Sharley.

'Vallie wanted to come too,' said Sharley, 'but that seat isn't very comfortable for two.'

It was very comfortable for one, at least I found it so. I had hardly ever been in a carriage before, and Sharley drove so nice and fast; she was very proud of being allowed to drive the two ponies. But they were so good, they seemed, like every one and everything else, determined to make that day a perfectly happy one.

When we got to the lodge of Moor Court Sharley began to drive more slowly, and looked about as if expecting some one.

'The others said they would come to meet us,' she explained, 'and sometimes Pert is rather naughty about startling the ponies, even though he can't bear being startled himself. Oh, there they are!'

As she spoke the four figures appeared at a turn in the drive. Nan and Vallie in the pretty pink frocks, which no longer made me feel discontented with my own, as nothing could be prettier, I was quite firmly convinced, than grandmamma's beautiful work, which Sharley had already admired in her own pleasant and hearty way.

We two got out of the pony-carriage, leaving grandmamma to be driven up to the house by the groom, the little girls saying that their mother was waiting for her on the lawn in front.

I had never seen the boys before. Percival seemed to me quite big, though he was one year younger than Sharley and smaller for his age. Quintin was more like Nan, slow and solemn and rather fat, so his nickname of Quick certainly didn't suit him very well. But they were both very nice and kind to me. I am quite sure Sharley had

Grandmamma's chair was still waiting to be decorated, so the next hour was spent very happily.—P. 67.

talked to them well about it before I came, though it was easy to see that when Pert was not on his best behaviour he was very fond of playing tricks.

I felt very happy, and not at all strange or frightened as I walked along between Sharley and Val, each holding one of my hands and chattering away about all we were going to do, though I had a queer, rather nice feeling as if I must be in a dream, it all seemed so pretty and wonderful.

And indeed many people, far better able to judge of such things than I, think that Moor Court is one of the loveliest places in England. I did not see much of the inside of the house that day, though I learnt to know it well afterwards. It was very old and very large, and everything about it seemed to me quite perfect. But on this day we amused ourselves almost altogether out of doors.

The children had already done a good deal to the arbour where we were to have tea; but grandmamma's chair was still waiting to be decorated, so the next hour was spent very happily in gathering branches of ivy and other pretty green things to twine about it, with here and there a bunch of flowers, which Mrs. Nestor had told the gardener we were to have.

Vallie was very anxious to make a wreath for

grandmamma, but though I thought it a very nice idea, I was afraid it would look rather funny, and when Sharley reminded us that wreaths couldn't be worn very well above a bonnet, we quite gave it up.

But we did make the table look very pretty, and at last everything was ready, except the tea itself and the hot cakes, which of course the servants would bring at the very end.

By the time we had finished it was nearly four o'clock, and we were not to have tea till half-past, so there was time for a nice game of hide-and-seek among the trees. I don't think I ever ran so fast or laughed so much in my life. They were all such good-natured children, even if they did have little quarrels they were soon over, and then I think they were all especially kind to me. I suppose they were sorry for me in some ways that did not come into my own mind at all.

Then we all went to the house to be made tidy for tea, and in spite of what grandmamma had said about not minding if my frock was dirtied I was very pleased to find that it was perfectly clean.

Grandmamma and Mrs. Nestor were waiting for us in the drawing-room; and we all went back to the arbour together, Sharley walking first with grand-

mamma, which was quite right, as the plan about tea had been all her own.

Grandmamma *was* pleased. I think she liked to see how fond these children had already got to be of her, though perhaps it would have been as well if Quick had not informed us in the middle of tea that he liked her a great, great deal better than his real grandmamma, whose nose was very big and her hair quite black.

'But she's very kind to us too,' said Sharley, 'only I don't think she cares much for little boys.'

'Nor for tomboys either,' said Pert, who did love teasing Sharley whenever he had a chance.

'Jerry's her favourite,' said Nan.

'And I think he deserves to be,' said her mother.

'I wish he was here to-day, I know that,' said Sharley. 'It's such a long time to the holidays, and it won't be so nice this year when they do come, as most likely a boy's coming with Jerry.'

'Two boys,' corrected Pert, 'their name's Vandeleur, and they're his greatest friends.'

'Vandeleur?' said grandmamma. 'I wonder if ——' and then she stopped. 'I have relations of that name,' she said, 'but I don't suppose they belong to the same family.'

'It is not a common name,' said Mrs. Nestor. 'But these boys are, I believe, orphans. Both their father and mother are dead, are they not, Sharley? Sharley knows the most about them,' she went on, 'for Gerard and she write long letters to each other always, and she hears all about his school friends and everything he is interested in.'

'Yes,' said Sharley, 'they are orphans. They have an old aunt or some relation who takes care of them. But I think they are rather lonely. They often spend all their holidays at school—that was why Jerry thought it would be nice to invite them here. I daresay it will be very nice for *them*, but *I* think it will quite spoil the holidays for *us*.'

'Come, Sharley,' said her mother, 'you must not be selfish.'

'What are the boys' Christian names?' asked grandmamma.

'Harry and Lindsay,' Sharley replied.

Grandmamma shook her head.

'No,' she said, as if thinking aloud, 'I never heard those names in the branch of the Vandeleurs I am connected with.'

CHAPTER VI

'WAVING VIEW'

I WAS only eight years old at the time we made the acquaintance of the family at Moor Court. It may seem strange and unlikely that I should remember so clearly all that happened when we first got to know them, but even though I was so young at the time I *do* recollect all about it very well.

For it was so new to me that it made a great impression.

Till then I had never had any real companions; as I have said already, I had scarcely ever had a meal out of our own house. It was like the opening of a new world to me.

But I have asked grandmamma about a few things which she remembers more exactly than I do. Especially about the Vandeleur boys, I mean about what was said of them. But for things that happened afterwards I daresay I should never have

thought of this again, though grandmamma did not forget about it. She told me over quite lately everything that had passed at that birthday tea.

The months, and indeed the years that followed that first happy day at Moor Court seem to me now, on looking back upon them, a good deal mixed up together—till, that is to say, a change, a melancholy one for me, came over my happy friendship with the Nestor children.

This change, however, did not come for fully three years, and these three years were very bright and sunny ones. Sharley and her sisters continued all that time to be my grandmamma's pupils—winter and summer, all the year round, except for some weeks of holiday at Christmas, and a rather longer time in the autumn, when the Nestors generally went to the sea-side for a change; unless the weather was terribly bad or stormy, twice a week they either walked over with a maid, or the governess-cart drawn by the fat pony made its appearance at the end of our path. Sometimes the little groom went on into the village if there were any messages, sometimes if it was cold he drove as far as the farm at the foot of the hill, where it was arranged that he could 'put up' for an

hour or two, sometimes in warm summer days the pony-cart just waited where it was.

Often, once a fortnight or so at least, in the fine season, I made one of the party on the little girls' return home. How we all managed to squeeze into the cart, or how old Bunch managed to take us all home without coming to grief on the way, I am sure I can't say.

I only know we *did* manage it, and so did he. For he is still alive and well, and no doubt 'ready to tell the story,' if he could speak.

We never seemed to be ill in those days. The Nestor children were no doubt very strong, and I grew much stronger. Then Middlemoor is such a splendidly healthy place.

I have some misty recollections of Nan and Vallie having the measles, and a doubt arising as to whether I had not got it too. But if it was measles it did not seem worse than a cold, and we were soon all out and about again, as merry as ever.

And grandmamma seemed to grow younger during those years. Her mind was more at rest for the time, for the steady payment she received for the girls' French lessons made all the difference in our little income, between being comfortable, with a

small extra in case of need, and being only *just* able to make both ends meet with a great deal of tugging. And grandmamma was happy about taking the money, for it was well earned; Sharley and the others made such good progress in French and after a little while in German also, even though Nan was by nature rather slow and Vallie dreadfully flighty, and not at all good at giving her attention.

But she *was* so sweet! I never saw any one so sweet as Vallie, when she had been found fault with and was sorry; the tears used to come up into her big brown eyes very slowly and stay there, making them look like velvety pansies with dewdrops in them.

Somehow Sharley always seemed the *most* my friend, though she was a good deal older. Perhaps it was through having known her the first, and partly, I daresay, because in *some* ways I was old for my age.

The big brother Gerard came home for his holidays three times a year. He was a very nice boy, I am sure, but I did not get to know him well, and I had rather a grudge at him. For when he was at Moor Court I seemed to see so much less of Sharley. It wasn't her fault. She was not a changeable girl at all, but Jerry had always been accustomed to having

her a great deal with him in his holidays, as she took pains to explain to me. So of course if she had given him up for me she *would* have been changeable.

She did her best, I will say that for her. She told Gerard all about me, and he was very nice to me. But it was in rather a big boy way, which I did not understand. I thought he was treating me like a baby when *he* only meant to be kind and brotherly. I remember one day being so offended at his lifting me over a stile, that it was all I could do not to burst into tears!

So it came to be the way among us, without anything being actually said about it, that during Jerry's holidays I was mostly with the four others—Nan and Vallie and the two younger boys.

And I daresay it was a good thing for me. For none of them were at all old for their age; they were just hearty, healthy, regular *children*, living in the present and very happy in it. And if I had been altogether with the older ones I might have grown more and more 'old-fashioned.' For Gerard was a very serious and thoughtful boy, and Sharley, though in outside ways she seemed rather wild and hoydenish, was really very clever and very wise, to be only the age she was. I never quite took in that side of her

character till I saw her with Jerry—she seemed quite transformed.

One thing came to pass, however, which was a great pleasure to the two people it chiefly concerned and to Sharley. As for me, I don't think I gave much attention to it, and I am not sure that if it had at all interfered with my own life I should not have been rather jealous!

This was a close friendship between Gerard Nestor and grandmamma.

And it is necessary to speak about it because it was the beginning of things which brought about great changes.

Grandmamma loved boys and she was one of those women that are well fitted to manage them. She used to say that till she got *me*, she had never had anything to do with *girls*. For her own children were both boys—papa was the elder, and the other was a dear boy who died when he was only sixteen, and whom of course I had never seen, though grandmamma liked me to speak of him as 'Uncle Guy.' Then, too, she had had some charge of her nephew, Mr. Cosmo Vandeleur.

Her friendship with Jerry came about by his reading French and German with her in the holidays.

He had never been out of England and he was anxious to improve his 'foreign languages,' as he was backward in them, besides having a very bad accent indeed.

Granny has often said she never had so attentive a pupil, and it was in talking with him—for 'conversation' was a very important part of her teaching—that she got to know so much of Gerard, and he so much of her.

She used to tell him stories of her own boys, Paul—Paul was papa—and Guy, in French, and he had to answer questions about the stories to show that he had understood her. And in these stories the name of Cosmo Vandeleur came to be mentioned.

The first time or so he heard it I don't think Jerry noticed it. But one day it struck him just as it had struck grandmamma that first day—the birthday-tea day—at Moor Court.

'Vandeleur,' said Jerry—it was one day when he had come over for his lesson, and as it was raining and I could not go out, I was sitting in the window making a cloak or something for my doll. 'Vandeleur,' he repeated. 'I wonder, Mrs. Wingfield, if your nephew is any relation to some boys at my school. They are great chums of mine—they were to have come home

with me for the summer holidays'—it was the Christmas holidays now,—'but their relations had settled something else for them and wouldn't let them come. I think their relations must be rather horrid.'

'I remember Sharley—I think it was Sharley—speaking of them,' said grandmamma. 'They are orphans, are they not?'

'Yes,' said Gerard. 'They've got guardians—one of them is quite an old woman. Her name is Lady Bridget Woodstone. They don't care very much for her. I think she must be very crabbed.'

'I do not think they can be related to my nephew,' said grandmamma. 'I never heard of any orphan boys in his family, and I never heard of Lady Bridget Woodstone. But Mr. Cosmo Vandeleur is only my nephew, because his mother was my husband's sister—so of course he *may* have relations I know nothing of. He always seemed to me very near when he was a boy, because he was so often with us.'

She sighed a little as she finished speaking. Thinking of Mr. Vandeleur made her sad. It did seem so strange that he had never written all these years.

And Jerry was very quick as well as thoughtful.

He saw that for some reason the mention of the name made her sad, so he said no more about the Vandeleur boys. Long afterwards he told us that when he went back to school he did ask Harry and Lindsay Vandeleur if they had any relation called Mr. Cosmo Vandeleur, but at that time they told him they did not know. They were quite under the care of old Lady Bridget, and she was not a bit like granny. She was the sort of old lady who treats children as if they had no sense at all; she never told the boys anything about themselves or their family, and when they spent the holidays with her, she always had a tutor for them—the strictest she could find, so that they almost liked better to stay on at school.

The three years I have been writing about must have passed quickly to grandmamma. They were so peaceful, and after we got to know the Nestors, much less lonely. And grandmamma says that it is quite wonderful how fast time goes once one begins to grow old. She does not seem to mind it. She is so very good—I cannot help saying this, for my own story would not be true if I did not keep saying *how* good she is. But I must take care not to let her see the places where I say it. She loves me as dearly

as she can, I know—and others beside me. But still I try not to be selfish and to remember that when the dreadful—dreadful-for-*me*—day comes that she must leave me, it will only for *her* be the going where she must often, often have longed to be—the country 'across the river,' where her very dearest have been watching for her for so long.

To me those three years seem like one bright summer. Of course we had winters in them too, but there is a feeling of sunshine all over them. And, actually speaking, those winters were very mild ones —nothing like the occasional severe ones, of another of which I shall soon have to tell.

I was so well too—growing so strong—stronger by far than grandmamma had ever hoped to see me. And as I grew strong I seemed to take in the delightfulness of it, though as a very little girl I had not often *complained* of feeling weak and tired, for I did not understand the difference.

Now I must tell about the change that came to the Nestors—a sad change for me, for though at first it seemed worse for them, in the end I really think it brought more trouble to granny and me than to our dear friends themselves.

It was one day in the autumn, early in October

I think, that the first beginning of the cloud came. Gerard had not long been back at school and we were just settling down into our regular ways again.

'The girls are late this morning,' said grandmamma. 'You see nothing of them from your watch-tower, do you, Helena?'

Granny always called the window-seat in our tiny drawing-room my 'watch-tower.' I had very long sight and I had found out that there was a bit of the road from Moor Court where I could see the pony-cart passing, like a little dark speck, before it got hidden again among the trees. After that open bit I could not see it again at all till it was quite close to our own road, as we called it—I mean the steep bit of rough cart-track leading to our little garden-gate.

I was already crouched up in my pet place, when grandmamma called out to me. She was in the dining-room, but the doors were open.

'No, grandmamma,' I replied. 'I don't see them at all. And I am sure they haven't passed Waving View in the last quarter-of-an-hour, for I have been here all that time.'

'Waving View,' I must explain, was the name we had given to the short stretch of road I have just spoken of, because we used to wave handkerchiefs to

each other—I at my watch-tower and Sharley from the pony-cart, at that point.

Grandmamma came into the drawing-room a moment or two after that and stood behind me, looking out at the window.

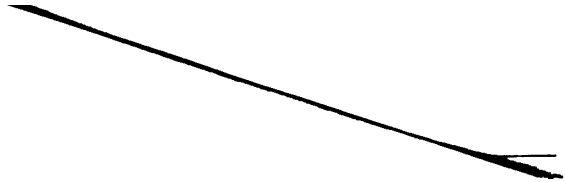
'Not that I could see them coming,' she said, 'till they are up the hill and close to us. But I do wonder why they are so late—half an hour late,' and she glanced at the little clock on the mantelpiece. 'I hope there is nothing the matter.'

I looked at her as she said that, for I felt rather surprised. It was never granny's way to expect trouble before it comes. I saw that her face was rather anxious. But just as I was going to speak, to say some little word about its not being likely that anything was wrong, I gave one other glance towards Waving View. This time I was not disappointed.

'Oh, granny,' I exclaimed, 'there they are! I am sure it is them—I know the way they jog along so well—only, grandmamma, they are not waving?'

And I think the anxious look must have come into my own face, for I remember saying, almost in a whisper, 'I do hope there is nothing the matter'—granny's very words.

'I do wonder why they are so late.'—P. 82.



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CHAPTER VII

THE BEGINNING OF TROUBLES

GRANDMAMMA was the one to reassure me.

'I scarcely think there can be anything wrong, as they are coming,' she said. 'You did not wave to them, either?'

'No,' I said, 'I *did* wave, but I got tired of it. And it's always they who do it first. You see there's no use doing it except at that place.'

'Well, they will be here directly, and then I must give them a little scolding for being so unpunctual,' said grandmamma, cheerfully.

But that little scolding was never given.

When the governess-cart stopped at our path there were only two figures in it—no, three, I should say, for there was the groom, and the two others were Nan and Vallie—Sharley was not there.

I ran out to meet them.

'Is Sharley ill?' I called out before I got to them.

Nan shook her head.

'No,' she was beginning, but Vallie, who was much quicker, took the words out of her mouth—that was a way of Vallie's, and sometimes it used to make Nan rather vexed. But this morning she did not seem to notice it; she just shut up her lips again and stood silent with a very grave expression, while Vallie hurried on—

'Sharley's not ill, but mother kept her at home, and we're late because we went first to the telegraph office at Yukes'—Yukes is a *very* tiny village half a mile on the other side of Moor Court, where there is a telegraph office. 'Father's ill, Helena, and I'm afraid he's very ill, for as soon as Dr. Cobbe saw him this morning he said he must telegraph for another doctor to London.'

'Oh, dear,' I exclaimed, 'I am so sorry,' and turning round at the sound of footsteps behind me I saw grandmamma, who had followed me out of the house. 'Granny,' I said, 'there *is* something the matter. Their father is very ill,' and I repeated what Vallie had just said.

'I am very grieved to hear it,' said grandmamma. Afterwards she told me she had had a sort of presentiment that something was the matter. 'I am so

sorry for your mother,' she went on. 'I wonder if I can be of use to her in any way.'

Then Nan spoke, in her slow but very exact way.

'Mother said,' she began, 'would you come to be with her this afternoon late, when the London doctor comes? She will send the brougham and it will bring you back again, if you would be so very kind. Mother is so afraid what the London doctor will say,' and poor Nan looked as if it was very difficult for her not to cry.

'Certainly, I will come,' said grandmamma at once. 'Ask Mrs. Nestor to send for me as soon as you get home if she would like to have me. I suppose—' she went on, hesitating a little, 'you don't know what is the matter with your father?'

'It is a sort of a cold that's got very bad,' said Vallie, 'it hurts him to breathe, and in the night he was nearly choking.'

Granny looked grave at this. She knew that Mr. Nestor had not been strong for some time, and he was a very active man, who looked after everything on his property himself, and hunted a good deal, and thought nothing about taking care of himself. He was a nice kind man, and all his people were very fond of him.

But she tried to cheer up the little girls and gave them their lesson as usual. It was much better to do so than to let them feel too unhappy. And I tried to be very kind and bright too—I saw that grandmamma wanted me to be the same way to them that she was.

But after they were gone she spoke to me pretty openly about her fears for Mr. Nestor.

'Dr. Cobbe would not have sent for a London doctor without good cause,' she said. 'All will depend on his opinion. It is possible that I may have to stay all night, Helena dear. You will not mind if I do?'

I *did* mind, very much. But I tried to say I wouldn't. Still, I felt pretty miserable when the Moor Court carriage came to fetch grandmamma, and she drove away, leaving me for the first time in my life, or rather the first time I could remember, alone with Kezia.

Kezia was very kind. She offered me to come into the kitchen and make cakes. But I was past eleven now—that is very different from being only eight. I did not care much for making cakes—I never have cared about cooking as some girls do, though I know it is a very good thing to understand

about it, and grandmamma says I am to go through a regular course of it when I get to be seventeen or eighteen. But I knew Kezia's cakes were much better than any I could make, so I thanked her, but said no—I would rather read or sew.

I had my tea all alone in the dining-room. Kezia was always so respectful about that sort of thing. Though she had been a nurse when I was only a tiny baby, she never forgot, as some old servants do, to treat me quite like a young lady, now I was growing older. She brought in my tea and set it all out just as carefully as when grandmamma was there, even more carefully in some ways, for she had made some little scones that I was very fond of, and she had got out some strawberry jam.

But I could not help feeling melancholy. I know it is wrong to believe in presentiments, or at least to think much about them, though *sometimes* even very wise people like grandmamma cannot help believing in them a little. But I really do think that there are times in one's life when a sort of sadness about the future does seem *meant*.

And I had been so happy for so long. And troubles must come.

I said that over to myself as I sat alone after tea,

and then all of a sudden it struck me that I was very selfish. This trouble was far, far worse for the Nestors than for me. Possibly by this time the London doctor had had to tell them that their father would never get better, and here was I thinking more, I am afraid, of the dulness of being one night without dear granny than of the sorrow that was perhaps coming over Sharley and the others of being without their father for always.

For I scarcely think my 'presentiments' would have troubled me much except for the being alone and missing granny so.

I made up my mind to be sensible and not fanciful. I got out what I called my 'secret work,' which was at that time a footstool I was embroidering for grandmamma's next birthday, and I did a good bit of it. That made me feel rather better, and when my bedtime came it was nice to think I had nothing to do but to go to sleep and stay asleep to make to-morrow morning come quickly.

I fell asleep almost at once. But when I woke rather with a start—and I could not tell what had awakened me—it was still quite, quite dark, certainly not to-morrow morning.

'Oh, dear!' I thought, 'what a bother! Here I

am as wide awake as anything, and I so seldom wake at all. Just this night when I wanted to sleep straight through.'

I lay still. Suddenly I heard some faint sounds. Some one was moving about downstairs. Could it be Kezia up still? It must be very late—quite the middle of the night, I fancied.

The sounds went on—doors shutting softly, then a slight creak on the stairs, as if some one were coming up slowly. I was not exactly frightened. I never thought of burglars—I don't think there has been a burglary at Middlemoor within the memory of man—but my heart did beat rather faster than usual and I listened, straining my ears and scarcely daring to breathe.

Then at last the steps stopped at my door, and some one began to turn the handle. I *almost* screamed. But—in one instant came the dear voice—

'Is my darling awake?' so gently, it was scarcely above a whisper.

'Oh, granny, dear, dear granny, is it you?' I said, and every bit of me, heart and ears and everything, seemed to give one throb of delight. I shall never forget it. It was like the day I ran into her arms down the steep garden-path.

'Did I startle you?' she went on. 'Generally you sleep so soundly that I hoped I would not awake you.'

'I was awake, dear grandmamma,' I said, 'and oh, I am so glad you have come home.'

I clung to her as if I would never let her go, and then she told me the news from Moor Court. The London doctor had spoken gravely, but still hopefully. With great care, the greatest care, he trusted Mr. Nestor would quite recover.

'So I came home to my little girl,' said grandmamma, 'though I have promised poor Mrs. Nestor to go to her again to-morrow.'

'I don't mind anything if you are here at night,' I said, with a sigh of comfort.

And then she kissed me again and I turned round and was asleep in five minutes, and when I woke the next time it *was* morning; the sunshine was streaming in at the window.

There were some weeks after that of a good deal of anxiety about Mr. Nestor, though he went on pretty well. Grandmamma went over every two or three days, just to cheer Mrs. Nestor a little—not that there was really anything to do, for they had trained nurses, and everything money could get.

The girls went on with their lessons as usual, which was of course much better for them. But in those few weeks Sharley almost seemed to grow into a woman.

I felt rather 'left behind' by her, for I was only eleven, and as soon as the first great anxiety about Mr. Nestor was over I did not think very much more about it. Nor did Nan and Vallie. We were quite satisfied that he would soon be well again, and that everything would go on as usual. Only Sharley looked grave.

At last the blow fell. It was a very bad blow to me, and in one way—which, however, I did not understand till some time later—even worse to grandmamma, though she said nothing to hint at such a thing in the least.

And it was a blow to the Nestor children, for they loved their home and their life dearly, and had no wish for any change.

This was it. They were all to go abroad almost immediately, for the whole winter at any rate. The doctors were perfectly certain that it was necessary for Mr. Nestor, and he would not hear of going alone, and Mrs. Nestor could not bear the idea of a separation from her children. Besides—they were very

rich, there were no difficulties in the way of their travelling most comfortably, and having everything they could want wherever they went to.

To me it was the greatest trouble I had ever known —and I really do think the little girls—Sharley too—minded it more on my account than on any other.

But it had to be.

Almost before we had quite taken in that it was really going to be, they were off—everything packed up, a courier engaged—rooms secured at the best hotel in the place they were going to—for all these things can be done in no time when people have lots of money, grandmamma said—and they were gone! Moor Court shut up and deserted, except for the few servants left in charge, to keep it clean and in good order.

I only went there once all that winter, and I never went again. I could not bear it. For in among the trees where we played I came upon the traces of our last paper-chase, and passing the side of the house it was even worse. For the schoolrooms and play-room were in that wing, and above them the nurseries, where Vallie used to rub her little nose against the panes when she was shut up with

one of her bad colds. Some cleaning was going on, for it was like Longfellow's poem exactly—

'I saw the nursery windows
Wide open to the air,
But the faces of the children,
They were no longer there.'

I just squeezed grandmamma's hand without speaking, and we turned away.

It *is* true that troubles do not often come alone. That winter was one of the very severe ones I have spoken of, that come now and then in that part of Middleshire.

For the Nestors' sake it made us all the more glad that they were safely away from weather which, in his delicate state, would very probably have killed their father. I think this was our very first thought when the snow began to fall, only two or three weeks after they left, and went on falling till the roads were almost impassable, and remained lying for I am afraid to say how long, so intense was the frost that set in.

I thought it rather good fun just at the beginning, and wished I could learn to skate. Grandmamma did not seem to care about my doing so, which I was rather surprised at, as she had often told me stories

of how fond she was of skating when she was young, and how clever papa and Uncle Guy were at it.

She said I had no one to teach me, and when I told her that I was sure Tom Linden, a nephew of the vicar's who was staying with his uncle and aunt just then, would help me, she found some other objection. Tom was a very stupid, very good-natured boy. I had got to know him a little at the Nestors. He was slow and heavy and rather fat. I tried to make granny laugh by saying he would be a good buffer to fall upon. I saw she was looking grave, and I felt a little cross at her not wanting me to skate, and I persisted about it.

'Do let me, grandmamma,' I said. 'I can order a pair of skates at Barridge's. They don't keep the best kind in stock, but I know they can get them.'

'No, my dear,' said grandmamma at last, very decidedly. 'I am not at all sure that it would be nice for you—it would have been different if the Nestors had been here. And besides, there are several things you need to have bought for you much more than skates. You must have extra warm clothing this winter.'

She did not say right out that she did not know where the money was to come from for my wants—

as for her own, when did the darling ever think of *them?*—but she gave a little sigh, and the thought did come into my head for a moment—was grandmamma troubled about money? But it did not stay there. We had been so comfortable the last few years that I had really thought less about being poor than when I was quite little.

And other things made me forget about it. For a very few days after that, most unfortunately, I got ill.

CHAPTER VIII

TWO LETTERS

It was only a bad cold. Except for having to stay in the house, I would not have minded it very much, for after the first few days, when I was feverish and miserable, I did not feel very bad. And like a child, I thought every day that I should be all right the next.

I daresay I should have got over it much quicker if the weather had not been so severe. But it was really awfully cold. Even my own sense told me it would be mad to think of going out. So I got fidgety and discontented, and made myself look worse than I really was.

And for the very first time in my life there seemed to come a little cloud, a little coldness, between dear grandmamma and me. Speaking about it since then, *she* says it was not all my fault, but *I* think it was. I was selfish and thoughtless. She was dull and

low-spirited, and I had never seen her like that before. And I did not know all the reasons there were for her being so, and I felt a kind of irritation at it. Even when she tried, as she often and often did, to throw it off and cheer me up in some little way by telling me stories, or proposing some new game, or new fancy-work, I would not meet her half-way, but would answer pettishly that I was tired of all those things. And I was vexed at several little changes in our way of living. All that winter we sat in the dining-room, and never had a fire in the drawing-room, and our food was plainer than I ever remembered it. Granny used to have special things for me—beef-tea and beaten-up eggs and port-wine —but I hated having them all alone and seeing her eating scarcely anything.

'I don't want these messy things as if I was really ill,' I said. 'Why don't we have nice little dinners and teas as we used?'

Grandmamma never answered these questions plainly; she would make some little excuse about not feeling hungry in frosty weather, or that the tradespeople did not like sending often. But once or twice I caught her looking at me when she did not know I saw her, and then there was something

in her eyes which made me think I was a horridly selfish child. And yet I did not *mean* to be. I really did not understand, and it was rather trying to be cooped up for so long, in a room scarcely bigger than a cupboard, after my free open life of the last three years or so.

Dr. Cobbe came once or twice at the beginning of my cold and looked rather grave. Then he did not come again for two or three weeks—I think he had told grandmamma to let him know if I got worse.

And one day when I had really made myself feverish by my fidgety grumbling, and then being sorry and crying, which brought on a fit of coughing, grandmamma got so unhappy that she tucked me up on the sofa by the fire, and went off herself, though it was late in the afternoon, to fetch him herself. She would not let Kezia go because she wanted to speak to him alone; I did not know it at the time, but I remember waking up and hearing voices near me, and there were the doctor and grandmamma. She was in her indoors dress just as usual, for me not to guess she had been out.

I sat up, feeling much the better for my sleep. Dr. Cobbe laughed and joked—that was his way—he listened to my breathing and pommelled me and

told me I was a little humbug. Then he went off into Kezia's kitchen, where there *had* to be a tiny fire, with grandmamma, and a few minutes later I heard him saying good-bye.

Grandmamma came back to me looking happier than for some time past. The doctor, she has told me since, really did assure her that there was nothing serious the matter with me, that I was a growing child and must be well fed and kept cheerful, as I was inclined to be nervous and was not exactly robust.

And the relief to grandmamma was great. That evening she was more like her old self than she had been for long, even though I daresay she was awake half the night thinking over the doctor's advice, and wondering what more she *could* do to get enough money to give me all I needed.

For some of her money-matters had gone wrong. That I did not know till long afterwards. It was just about the time of Mr. Nestor's illness, and it was not till the Moor Court family had left that she found out the worst of it—that for two or three years *at least* we should be thirty or forty pounds a year poorer than we had been.

It *was* hard on her—coming at the very same

time as the extra money for the lessons left off! And the severe winter and my cold all added to it. It even made it more difficult for her to hear of other pupils, or to get any orders for her beautiful fancy-work. No visitors would come to Middlemoor *this* winter, though when it was mild they sometimes did.

Still, from the day of Dr. Cobbe's visit things improved a little—for the time at least. And in the end it was a good thing that grandmamma was not tempted to try her eyes with any embroidery again, as she really might have made herself blind. It had been such a blessing that she did not need to do it during the years she gave lessons to Sharley and her sisters.

I went on getting better pretty steadily, especially once I was allowed to go out a little, though, as it was a very cold spring, it was only for some time *very* little, just an hour or so in the best part of the day. And grandmamma followed Dr. Cobbe's advice, though I never shall understand how she managed to do so. She was so determined to be cheerful that when I look back upon it now it almost makes me cry. I had all the nourishing things to eat that it was possible to get, and how thoughtless and ungrateful I was! My appetite was not very good,

and I remember actually grumbling at having to take beef-tea, and beaten-up eggs, and things like that at odd times. I scarcely like to say it, but in my heart I do not believe grandmamma had enough to eat that winter.

About Easter—or rather at the time for the big school Easter holidays, which does not always match real Easter—we had a pleasant surprise. At least it was a pleasant surprise for grandmamma—I don't know that I cared about it particularly, and I certainly little thought what would come of it!

One afternoon Gerard Nestor walked in.

Granny's face quite lighted up, and for a moment or two I felt very excited.

'Have you all come home?' I exclaimed. 'I haven't had a letter from Sharley for ever so long—perhaps—perhaps she meant to surprise me,' I had been going to say, but something in Jerry's face stopped me. He looked rather grave; not that he was ever anything but quiet.

'No,' he said, 'I only wish they *were* all back, or likely to come. I'm afraid there's no chance of it. The doctors out there won't hear of it this year at all. Just when father was hoping to arrange for coming back soon, they found out something or

other unsatisfactory about him, and now it is settled that he must stay out of England another whole year at least. They are speaking of Algeria or Egypt for next winter.'

My face fell. I was on the point of crying. Gerard looked very sympathising.

'I did not myself mind it so much till I came down here,' he said. 'But it is so lonely and dull at Moor Court. I hope you will let me come here a great deal, Mrs. Wingfield. I mean to work hard at my foreign languages these holidays—it will give me something to do. You see it wasn't worth while my going out to Hyères for only three weeks, and I hoped even they might be coming back. So I asked to come down here. I didn't think it could be so dull.'

'You are all alone at home?' said grandmamma. 'Yes, it must be very lonely. I shall be delighted to read with you as much as you like. I am not very busy.'

'Thank you,' said Gerard. 'Well, I only hope you won't have too much of me. May I stay to tea to-day?'

'Certainly,' said grandmamma. But I noticed—I don't think Gerard did—that her face had grown

rather anxious-looking as he spoke. 'If you like,' she went on, 'we can glance over your books, some of them are still here, and settle on a little work at once.'

'All right,' said he. But then he added, rather abruptly, 'You are not looking well, Mrs. Wingfield? I think you have got thinner. And Helena looks rather white, though she has not grown much.'

I felt vexed at his saying I had not grown much.

'It's no wonder I am white,' I said in a surly tone. 'I have been mewed up in the house almost ever since Sharley and all of them went away.'

And then grandmamma explained about my having been ill.

'I'm very sorry,' said Jerry, 'but you look worse than Helena, Mrs. Wingfield.'

I felt crosser and crosser. I fancied he meant to reproach me with grandmamma's looking ill, even though it made me uneasy too. I glanced at her—a faint pink flush had come over her face at his words.

'*I* don't think granny looks ill at all,' I said.

'No, indeed, I am very well,' she said, with a smile.

Gerard said no more, but I know he thought me a selfish spoilt child. And from that moment he set

himself to watch grandmamma and to find out if anything was really the matter.

He *did* find out, and that pretty quickly, I fancy, that we were much poorer. But it was very difficult for him to do anything to help grandmamma. She was so dignified, and in some ways reserved. She got a letter from Mrs. Nestor a few days later, thanking her for reading with Jerry again, and saying that of course the lessons must be arranged about as before. And it vexed her a very little. (She has told me about it since.) Perhaps she was feeling unusually sensitive and depressed just then. But however that may have been, she wrote a letter to Mrs. Nestor, which made her really *afraid* of offering to pay. It was not as if there was time for a good many lessons, granny wrote—would not Mrs. Nestor let her render this very small service as a friend?

And Jerry did not know what he *could* do. It was not the season for game, except rabbits—and he did send rabbits two or three times—and I know now that he scarcely dared to stay to tea, or *not* to stay, for if he refused granny seemed hurt.

On the whole, nice as he was, it was almost a relief when he went away back to school.

Still things were not so bad as in winter. I was

really all right again, and a little money come in to grandmamma about May or June that she had not dared to hope for. We got on pretty well that summer.

None of the Nestors came to Moor Court at all. Gerard joined them for the long holidays in Switzerland. Mrs. Nestor wrote now and then to granny, and Sharley to me, but of course there was not the least hint of what Gerard had told them. I think they believed and hoped he had exaggerated it—he was the sort of boy to fancy things worse than they were if he cared about people, I think.

And so it got on to be the early autumn again. I think it was about the middle of September when the first beginning of the great change in our lives came.

It was cold already, and the weather prophets were talking of another severe winter. Grandmamma watched the signs of it anxiously. She kept comparing it with the same time last year till I got quite tired of the subject.

'Really, grandmamma,' I said one morning, 'what doos it matter? If it is very cold we must have big fires and keep ourselves warm. And one thing I know—I am not going to be shut up again

like last winter. I am going to get skates and have some fun as soon as ever the frost comes.'

I said it half jokingly, but still I was ready to be cross too. I had not improved in some ways since I was ill. I was less thoughtful for grandmamma and quite annoyed if she did not do exactly what I wanted, or if she seemed interested in anything but me. In short, I was very spoilt.

She did not answer me about the skates, for at that moment Kezia brought in the letters. It was not by any means every morning that we got any, and it was always rather an excitement when we saw the postman turning up our path.

That morning there were two letters. One was for me from Sharley. I knew at once it was from her by the foreign stamp and the thin paper envelope, even before I looked at the writing. I was so pleased that I rushed off with it to my favourite window-seat, without noticing grandmamma, who had quietly taken her own letter from the little tray Kezia handed it to her on and was examining it in a half-puzzled way. I remembered afterwards catching a glimpse of the expression on her face, but at the moment I gave no thought to it.

There was nothing *very* particular in Sharley's

letter. It was very affectionate—full of longings to be coming home again, even though she allowed that their present life was very bright and interesting. I was just laughing at a description of Pert and Quick going to market on their own account, and how they bargained with the old peasant women, when a slight sound—*was* it a sound or only a sort of feeling in the air?—made me look up from the open sheet before me, and glance over at grandmamma.

For a moment I felt quite frightened. She was leaning back in her chair, looking very white, and I could almost have thought she was fainting, except that her lips were moving as if she were speaking softly to herself.

I flew across the room to her.

'Granny,' I said, '*dear* granny, what is it? Are you ill—is anything the matter?'

Just at first, I think, I forgot about the letter lying on her lap—but before she spoke she touched it with her fingers.

'I am only a little startled, dear child,' she said, 'startled and——' I could not catch the other word she said, she spoke it so softly, but I think it was 'thankful.' 'No, there is nothing wrong, but you will understand my feeling rather upset when I tell

you that this letter is from Cosmo—you know whom I mean, Helena, Cosmo Vandeleur, my nephew, who has not written to me all these years.'

At once I was full of interest, not unmixed—and I think it was natural—with some indignation.

'So he is alive and well, I suppose?' I said, rather bitterly. 'Well, granny, I hope you will not trouble about him any more. He must be a horrid man, after all your kindness to him when he was a boy, never to have written or seemed to care if you were alive or dead.'

'No, dear,' said grandmamma, whose colour was returning, though her voice still sounded weak and tremulous—'no, dear. You must not think of him in that way. Careless he has certainly been, but he has not lost his affection for me. I will explain it all to you soon, but I must think it over first. I feel still so upset, I can scarcely take it in.'

She stopped, and her breath seemed to come in gasps. I was not a stupid child, and I had plenty of common sense.

'Granny, dear,' I said, 'don't try to talk any more just now. I will call Kezia, and she must give you some water, or tea, or something. And I won't call Mr. Vandeleur horrid if it vexes you.'

Kezia knew how to take care of grandmamma, though it was very, very seldom she was ever faint or nervous or anything of that kind.

And something told me that the best *I* could do was to leave dear granny alone for a little with the faithful servant who had shared her joys and sorrows for so long.

So I took my own letter—Sharley's letter I mean, and ran upstairs to fetch my hat and jacket.

'I'm going out for a little, grandmamma,' I said, putting my head in again for half a second at the drawing-room door as I passed. 'It isn't cold this morning, and I've got a long letter from Sharley to read over and over again.'

'Take care of yourself, darling,' said granny, and as I shut the door I heard her say to Kezia, 'dear child—she has such tact and thoughtfulness for her age. It is for her I am so thankful, Kezia.'

I was pleased to be praised. I have always loved praise—too much, I am afraid. But my conscience told me I had *not* been thoughtful for grandmamma lately, not as thoughtful as I might have been certainly. This feeling troubled me on one side, and on the other I was dying with curiosity to know what it was granny was thankful about. The mere

fact of a letter having come from that 'horrid, selfish, ungrateful man,' as I still called him to myself, though I would not speak of him so to grandmamma, could not be anything to be so thankful about—at least not to be thankful for *me*. What could it be? What had he written to say?

I am afraid that Sharley's letter scarcely had justice done to it the second time I read it through —between every line would come up the thought of what grandmamma had said, and the wondering what she could mean. And besides that, the uncomfortable feeling that I was not as good as she thought me—that I did not deserve all the love and anxiety she lavished on me.

CHAPTER IX

A GREAT CHANGE

PERHAPS here it will be best for me to tell straight off what the contents of Mr. Vandeleur's letter were. Not, I mean, to go into all as to when and how grandmamma told me about it, with 'she said's' and 'I said's.' Besides, it would not be quite correct to tell it that way, for as a matter of fact I did not understand everything *then* as I do now that I am several years older, and it would be difficult not to mix up what I have since come to know with the ideas I then had—ideas which were in some ways mistaken and childish.

First of all, how do you think Cousin Cosmo, as I was told to call him, had come to write again after all those years of silence? What had put it into his head?

The explanation is rather curious. It all came from Gerard Nestor's being at Moor Court that

Easter, and feeling so sorry for grandmamma and so sure that she was in trouble.

I have told, as we knew afterwards, that he had written to his people, but that grandmamma's way of answering made them think, and hope, that he had fancied more than was really the matter, and besides it was difficult for the Nestors, who were not *relations*, to do anything to help grandmamma, unless she had in some way given them her confidence. At that time they were hoping to come home the following spring, and then, probably, Mrs. Nestor would have found out more.

But when Gerard first went back to school his head was full of it. He had not been *told* anything, it was only his own suspicions, so there was no harm in his speaking of it, as he did, though quite privately, to his great friend, Harry Vandeleur.

And Harry gave him some confidences in return. Lady Bridget Woodstone, the old lady who was guardian to him and his brother, had lately died—the boys had spent their last holidays at school, but a new guardian had now appeared on the scene. This was a cousin of theirs whom, till then, they had never heard of, and this cousin was no other than grandmamma's nephew, Mr. Cosmo Vandeleur.

Gerard quite started when he heard the name, which he remembered quite well. Harry said that Mr. Cosmo Vandeleur was grave and quiet, he and Lindsay felt rather afraid of him, but they would know better what sort of person he was when they had spent the holidays with him.

'We are to go to his house, or at least to a house he has got in Devon, near the seaside, next August,' he told Gerard, and he promised that he would ask his guardian if he had any relation called Mrs. Wingfield, and if he found it was the same, he would tell him what Gerard had said, and how all these years she had been hoping to hear from him. For granny had told Gerard almost as much as she had told me of how strange it was that 'Cosmo' never wrote.

Well now you—by 'you' of course I mean whoever reads this story, if ever any one does—you begin to see how it came about. Harry Vandeleur *did* tell his guardian about us, or about grandmamma, and found out that she *was* his aunt. Mr. Vandeleur was very much startled, Harry said, to hear about how very differently she was living now, and he wrote down the address and told Harry he would make further enquiries.

That was all Harry knew, for Mr. Vandeleur was very reserved, and Harry and Lindsay did not feel as if they knew him any better after the holidays than before. Mrs. Vandeleur was very ill, though they thought she would have liked to be kind; they were always being told not to make a noise, and so they stayed out-of-doors as much as they could. It was rather dull (*very* dull, I should think), and they hoped they would not spend their next holidays there; they would almost rather stay at school.

It was August or September when Mr. Vandeleur heard about grandmamma. He did not at once write to her; he made enquiries of the lawyer who had for many years managed grandpapa's and papa's affairs, and he found it was only too true, that granny was *very* badly off. But even then he did not write immediately, for Mrs. Vandeleur got worse and for a little while they were afraid she was going to die.

He told granny this in his letter, but went on to say that Mrs. Vandeleur was better, and the doctors hoped she might be moved home to their house in London after the new year. In the meantime he was in great difficulty what to do, he had to be in London a good deal, and it was a pity to shut up the house, as they had made it all very nice, and they

had good servants. And even when Mrs. Vandeleur was much better she must not be troubled about housekeeping or anything for a long time, and besides this, there was a new responsibility upon him, which he would tell granny about afterwards. He meant the care of the two boys, but he did not speak of them then.

Some part of this, grandmamma told me that very evening; she also told me how sorry her nephew was about his long silence, though, as I think I said before, he *had* written and got no answer,—a letter which she had never received.

Here I find I must change my plan a little after all, and go into conversation again. For as I am writing there comes back to me one part of our talk that evening so clearly, that I think I can remember almost every word.

We had got as far as grandmamma telling me most of what I have now written down, but still I did not see why the letter had so upset her or why she had whispered something to herself about being 'thankful.'

'Well,' I said, 'I am glad he has written if it pleases you, grandmamma. But I don't think I want ever to see him.'

'You must not be prejudiced, Helena dear,' she answered. 'I think it very likely you will see him, and before very long. I have not yet told you what he proposes. He wants us to go to—to pay him a long visit in London. He says I should be a very great help to him and Agnes—Agnes is his wife—as I could take charge of things for her.'

'Of course you would be a great help,' I said. 'But I think it is rather cool of him to expect you to give up your own home and go off there just to be of use to them.'

Grandmamma sighed. She did not want to tell me too much of her increasing anxiety about money, and yet without doing so it was difficult for her to make me understand how really kind Mr. Vandeleur's proposal was, and how it had not come a day too soon.

'There are more reasons than that for my accepting his invitation,' she said. 'It will be of advantage to us in many ways not to spend the coming winter here, but in a warm, large house. If we had weather like last year I should dread it very much. London is on the whole very healthy in winter, in spite of the fogs. And you are growing old enough to take in new ideas, Helena, and to benefit by seeing something more of life.'

I felt very strange, almost giddy, with the thought of such a change.

'Do you really mean, grandmamma,' I said, 'that —that you are thinking of going there *soon?*'

'Very soon,' she answered, 'almost at once. It may get cold and wintry here any day, and besides that, my nephew is very anxious to settle his own plans as quickly as possible.'

I said nothing for a minute or two. In my heart I was not at all sorry at the prospect of a winter in London, even though I naturally shrank from leaving dear old Windy Gap, the only home I had ever known. But the sort of spoilt way I had got into kept me from expressing the pleasure I felt—that one side of me felt, anyway.

'I don't believe he cares about us,' I said at last rather grumpily. 'I am sure he is a very selfish man.'

Grandmamma looked distressed, but she was wise, too. She saw I was really inclined to be 'naughty' about it.

'Helena, my dearest child,' she said, and though she spoke most kindly I heard by her voice that she would be firm, 'you must not yield to prejudice, and you must trust me. This invitation is the very best thing that could have come to us at present, and I

am deeply grateful for it. It is rather startling, I know, but there should be a good deal of pleasure for you in our new prospects. And I am sure you will see this in a day or two. Now go to bed, my darling. To-morrow we shall have a great deal to talk over, and you must keep well and strong so as to be able to help me.'

She kissed me tenderly, and I whispered 'Good-night, dear grandmamma,' gently and affectionately.

But as soon as I got upstairs and was alone in my own little room, I burst into tears. I daresay it was only natural. Still, I see now that my feelings were not altogether what they should have been. There was a great deal of selfishness and spoiltness mixed up with them.

After that evening I have rather a confused remembrance of the next two or three weeks. Things seemed to hurry on in a bewildering way, and of course it was all the more bewildering to me, as I had never known any change or uprooting of the kind in my life.

Grandmamma was exceedingly busy. She had to write very often to Mr. Vandeleur, and he replied in a most business-like way, generally, I think, by

return. It was no longer a great event for the postman to be seen turning up our path, and as well as letters he sometimes now brought parcels.

For grandmamma was determined that we should both look nice when we first went to London to live in her nephew's big house, where there were so many servants.

'We must do him credit,' she said to me, with a smile. I understood what she meant, and I had a feeling of pride about it, too, and I was very pleased to have some new dresses and hats and other things. But with me there was no good feeling to my cousin mixed up in all this. I now know that there was reason for grandmamma's wish to gratify him; he behaved most generously and thoughtfully about everything, sending her more than sufficient money for all we needed, and doing it in such a nice way—just as a son who had grown rich might take pleasure in helping a mother to whom he owed more than mere money could ever repay.

But though grandmamma read out to me bits of his letters in which he was always repeating how grateful he was to her for coming to his aid in his difficulties, she did not tell me the whole particulars of her arrangements with him. He would not have

liked it, and I was really too young to have been told all these money-matters.

I did notice that there was never any mention of me in what she read to me. And now I know that Mr. Vandeleur did *not* particularly rejoice at the prospect of my living with them too. He had proposed that I should be sent to some very good school, for he knew nothing of children, especially of little girls. I think he believed they were even more tiresome and mischievous and bothering in every way than boys.

Grandmamma would not listen for an instant to this proposal. Her first and greatest duty in life was her granddaughter, 'Paul's little girl,' and she would do *anything* rather than be separated from me, especially as I was delicate and required care. In reality I was not nearly as delicate as she thought. But I daresay it did not add to my cousin's wish to have me in his house to hear that I was considered so.

Among the other things that grandmamma had to arrange about was what to do with Windy Gap. In her heart I believe she thought it very unlikely that it would ever be our home again, but she did not say anything of this kind to me. She went off one day

to Mr. Timbs to ask him to try to let it as it was, with our furniture in. He promised to do his best, but did not think it likely it would let in the winter.

'And by the spring we shall be coming back again,' I said, when granny told me this. I had not gone with her to Mr. Timbs; she had made some little excuse for not taking me.

To this she did not reply, and I thought no more about it, but I was glad to hear that Kezia was to stay on in the cottage to keep it all aired and in nice order. And I said to her secretly that if granny and I were not happy in Chichester Square—that was the name of the gloomy, rather old-fashioned square, filled with handsome gloomy houses, where Mr. Vandeleur lived—it was nice to feel that we had only to drive to the station and get into the train and be 'home' again in four or five hours.

Kezia smiled, though I think in her heart she was much more inclined to cry, and said she hoped to hear of our being very happy indeed in London, though of course she would look forward to seeing us again.

I shall never forget the day we left our dear little cottage. It had begun to be wintry, a sprinkling of

snow was on the ground and the air was quite frosty, though the morning was bright. I did feel so strange—sorrowful yet excited, and as if I really did not know who I was. And though the tears were running down poor Kezia's face when she bade us good-bye at the window of the railway carriage, I could not have cried if I had wished. We had a three miles' drive to the station. It was only the third or fourth time in my life I had ever been there, and I had never travelled for longer than half an hour or so, when granny had taken me, and once or twice Sharley and the others, to one of the neighbouring towns famed for their beautiful cathedrals.

We travelled second class. I thought it very comfortable, and it was very nice to have foot-warmers, which I had never seen before. My spirits rose steadily and even grandmamma's face had a pinky colour, which made her look quite young.

'I should like to travel like this for a week without stopping,' I said.

Granny smiled.

'I don't think you would,' she said. 'You will feel you have had quite enough of it by the time we get to London.'

And after an hour or two, especially when the short winter afternoon grew misty and dull, so that I could scarcely distinguish the landscape as we flew past, I began to agree with her.

'It will be quite dark when we get to Chichester Square,' said grandmamma. 'You must wait for your first real sight of London till to-morrow. I hope the weather will not be foggy.'

'Will there be flys at the station?' I asked, 'or did you write to order one?'

Grandmamma smiled.

'No, dear, that would not be necessary. There are always lots of four-wheelers and hansoms. But Mr. Vandeleur is sending a footman to meet us and he will find us a cab.'

'Hasn't he got a carriage then?' said I.

Grandmamma shook her head.

'Not in London. Their carriages and horses are in the country still for Mrs. Vandeleur. They will not be sent back to London till she comes.'

'I hope that won't be for a good long while,' I said to myself, rather unfeelingly, for I might have remembered that as soon as my cousin's wife was well enough she was to return. So her staying away long would mean her not getting well.

Their being away—for Mr. Vandeleur was not in London himself just then—was the part that pleased me the most of the whole plan. I thought it would be great fun to be alone in London with grandmamma, and I had been making lists of the things I wanted her to do and the places we should go to see. It never struck me that she could have any one or anything to think of but me myself!

CHAPTER X

NO. 29 CHICHESTER SQUARE

It was quite dark when we arrived at Paddington Station, and long before then, as grandmamma had prophesied, I had had much more than enough of the railway journey at first so pleasant.

I was tired and sleepy. It all seemed very, very strange and confusing to me—the huge railway station, the dimly burning gas-lamps, the bustle, the lots of people. For, as I have to keep reminding you, there is scarcely ever nowadays a child who leads so quiet and unchangeful a life as mine had been. I felt in a dream. If I had been less tired in my body I daresay my mind and fancy would have been amused and excited by it all. As it was, I just clung to grandmamma stupidly, wondering how she kept her head, wondering still more, when I heard her suddenly talking to some one—who turned out to be Mr. Vandeleur's footman—how in the world

she or he, or both of them, had managed to find each other out in the crowd!

I did not speak. After a while I remember finding myself, and granny of course, safe in a four-wheeler, which seemed narrow and stuffy compared to the Middlemoor flys, and jolted along with a terrible rattle and noise, so that I could scarcely distinguish the words grandmamma said when once or twice she spoke to me. I daresay a good deal of the noise was outside the cab, and some of it perhaps inside my own head, for it did not altogether stop even when *we* did—that is to say when we drew up at 29 Chichester Square.

The house was very large—the hall looked to me almost as large as the hall at Moor Court. It was not really so, but I could scarcely judge of anything correctly that night. I was so very tired.

A nice-looking oldish man came forward and bowed respectfully to grandmamma. He was the butler. He handed us over, so to say, to a nice-looking oldish woman, who was the head housemaid, and she took us at once upstairs to our rooms, the butler asking grandmamma to leave the luggage and the cab-paying to him—he would see that it was all right. She thanked him nicely, but rather

A nice-looking oldish man came forward and bowed respectfully to grandmamma.—P. 126.

'grandly'—not at all as if she was not accustomed to lots of servants and attention, which I was pleased at. It was a good thing for me that I had been so much with the Nestors; it prevented my seeming awkward or shy with so many servants about, which otherwise I might have been. Grandmamma of course *had* been used to being rich, but *I* never had.

There came a disappointment the very first thing. Hales, the housemaid, threw open the door of a large, rather gloomy-looking bedroom, where a fire was burning and candles already lighted.

'Your room, ma'am,' she said. 'Missie's——' she hesitated. 'Miss Wingfield's,' said granny. 'Miss Wingfield's,' Hales repeated, 'is on the next floor but one.'

Grandmamma looked uneasy.

'Is it far from this room?' she said.

'Oh no, ma'am, just the staircase—it is over this. Mr. Vandeleur thought it was the best. It was Mrs. Vandeleur's when she was a little girl.' For the house in Chichester Square had been left to Cousin Agnes by her parents a few years ago; that was why it seemed rather old-fashioned. 'All the rooms on this floor besides this one,' Hales went on, 'are Mrs. Vandeleur's; and master's study, and the next

floor are spare rooms, except to the back, and we thought it was fresher and pleasanter to the front for the young lady.'

Grandmamma looked pleased at the kind way Hales spoke, but still she hesitated. I gave her a little tug.

'I don't mind,' I said, for I was not at all a frightened child about sleeping alone and things like that. She smiled back at me. 'That's right,' she said, and I felt rewarded.

My room was a nice one when I got there, but it did seem a tremendous way up, and it looked rather bare and felt rather chilly, even though there was a fire burning, which, however, had not been lighted very long. The housemaid went towards it and gave it a poke, murmuring something about 'Belinda being so careless.' Belinda, as I soon found out, was the second housemaid, and it was she who was to wait upon me and take care of my room.

'You must ring for anything you want, miss,' said Hales, 'and if Belinda isn't attentive perhaps you will mention it.'

And so saying she left me. I felt rather lonely, even though grandmamma was in the same house. There was a deserted feeling about the room as if it

had not been used for a very long time, and my two boxes looked very small indeed. I felt no interest in unpacking my things, even though I had brought my books and some of my little ornaments.

'They will look nothing in this great bare place,' I thought. 'I won't take them out, and then I shall have the feeling that we are not going to be here for long.'

A queer sort of home-sickness for Windy Gap and for my life there came over me.

'I do wish we had not come here; I'm sure I'm going to hate it. I think grandmamma might have come up with me to see my room,' and I stood there beside the flickering little fire, feeling far from happy or even amiable.

Suddenly, the sound of a gong startled me. I had not even begun to take off my hat and jacket. I did so now in a hurry, and then turned to wash my hands and face, somewhat cheered to find a can of nice hot water standing ready. Then I smoothed my hair with a little pocket-comb I had, as I dared not wait to take out any of my things. But I am afraid I did not look as neat as usual or as I might have done if I hadn't wasted my time.

I hurried downstairs; a door stood open, and

looking in, I was sure that it was the dining-room, and grandmamma there waiting for me. A table, which to me seemed very large, though it was really an ordinary-sized round one, was nicely arranged for tea. How glad I was that it was not dinner!

'Come, dear,' said grandmamma, 'you must be very hungry.'

'I couldn't change my dress, grandmamma,' I said, not quite sure if she would not be displeased with me.

'Of course not,' she replied, cheerfully, 'I never expected it this first evening.'

My spirits rose when I had had a nice cup of tea and something to eat—it is funny how our bodies rule our minds sometimes—and I began to talk more in my usual way, especially as, to my great relief, the servants had by this time left the room.

'Shall we have tea like this every evening, grandmamma?' I asked; 'it is so much nicer than dinner.'

Grandmamma hesitated.

'Yes,' she said, 'while we are alone I think it will be the best plan, as you are too young for late dinner. When your cousins come home, of course things will be regularly arranged.'

'That means,' I thought to myself, 'that I shall have all my meals alone, I suppose,' and again an unreasonably cross feeling came over me.

Grandmamma noticed it, I think, but she said nothing, and very soon after we had finished tea she proposed that I should go to bed. She took me upstairs herself to my room, and waited till I was in bed; then she kissed me as lovingly and tenderly as ever, but, all the same, no sooner had she left me alone than I buried my face in the pillow and burst into tears. I had an under feeling that grandmamma was not quite pleased with me. I know now that she was only anxious, and perhaps a little disappointed, at my not seeming brighter. For, after all, everything she had done and was doing was for my sake, and I should have trusted her and known this by instinct, instead of allowing myself from the very first beginning of our coming to London to think I was a sort of martyr.

'I can see how it's going to be,' I thought, 'as soon as ever Mr. and Mrs. Vandeleur come back I shall be nowhere at all and nobody at all in this horrid, gloomy London. Cousin Agnes will be grandmamma's first thought, and I shall be expected to spend most of my life up in my room by myself. It

is too bad, it isn't my fault that I am an orphan with no other home of my own. I would rather have stayed at Windy Gap, however poor we were, than feel as I know I am going to do.'

But in the middle of all these miserable ideas I fell asleep, and slept very soundly—I don't think I dreamt at all—till the next morning.

When I opened my eyes I thought it was still the night. There seemed no light, but by degrees, as I got accustomed to the darkness, I made out the shapes of the two windows. Then a clock outside struck seven, and gradually everything came back to me—the journey and our arrival and the unhappy thoughts amidst which I had fallen asleep.

Somehow, even though as yet there was nothing to cheer me—for what can be gloomier than to watch the cold dawn of a winter's morning creeping over the gray sky of London?—somehow, things seemed less dismal already. The fact was I had had a very good night, and was feeling rested and refreshed, so much so that I soon began to fidget and to wish that some one would come with my hot water and say it was time to get up.

This did not happen till half-past seven, when a knock at the door was followed by the appearance of

Belinda—at least I guessed it was Belinda, for I had not seen her before. She was a pleasant enough looking girl, but with rather a pert manner, and she spoke to me as if I were about six.

'You'd better get up at once, miss, as breakfast's to be so early, and I'm to help you to dress if you need me.'

'No, thank you,' I said with great dignity, 'I don't want any help. But where's my bath?'

'I've had no orders about a bath,' she replied, 'but, to be sure, you can't go to the bathroom, as it's next master's dressing-room. You'll have to speak to Hales about it,' and she went away murmuring something indistinctly as to new ways and new rules.

In a few minutes, however, she came back again, lumbering a bath after her and looking rather cross.

'How different she is from Kezia,' I thought to myself. 'I would not have minded anything as much if she had come with us.'

Still, I was sensible enough to know that it was no use making the worst of things, and I think I must have looked rather pleasanter and more cheerful than the evening before, when I tapped at grandmamma's door and went downstairs to breakfast holding her hand.

She had much more to think of and trouble about than I, and if I had not been so selfish I was quite sensible enough to have understood this. A great many things required rearranging and overlooking in the household, for, though the servants were good on the whole, it was long since they had had a mistress's eye over them, and without that, even the best servants are pretty sure to get into careless ways. And grandmamma was so very conscientious that she felt even more anxious about all these things for Mr. and Mrs. Vandeleur's sake, than if it had been her own house and her own servants. Besides, though she was so clever and experienced, it was a good many years since she had had a large house to look after, as our little home at Middlemoor had been so very, very simple. Yes, I see now it must have been very hard upon her, for, instead of doing all I could to help her, I was quite taken up with my own part of it, and ready to grumble at and exaggerate every little difficulty or disagreeableness.

I think grandmamma tried for some time not to see the sort of humour I was in, and how selfish and spoilt I had become. She excused me to herself by saying I was tired, and that such a complete change

of life was trying for a child, and by kind little reasons of that sort.

'I shall be rather busy this morning,' she said to me that first day at breakfast, 'but if it keeps fine we can go out a little in the afternoon, and let you have your first peep of London. Let me see, what can you do with yourself this morning? You have your things to unpack still, and I daresay you would like to put out your ornaments and books in your own room.'

'I don't mean to put them out,' I said, 'it's not worth while. I will keep my books in one of the boxes and just get one out when I want it, and as for the ornaments, they wouldn't look anything in that big, bare room.'

But as I said this I caught sight of grandmamma's face, and I felt ashamed of being so grumbling when I was really feeling more cheerful and interested in everything than the night before. So I changed my tone a little.

'I will unpack all my things,' I said, 'and see how they look, anyway. Perhaps I'd better hang up my new frocks, I wouldn't like them to get crushed.'

'I should think Belinda would have unpacked your clothes by this time,' said grandmamma, 'but

no doubt you'll find something to do. But, by the bye, they may not have lighted a fire in your room, don't stay upstairs long if you feel chilly, but bring your work down to the library.' I went upstairs. In the full daylight, though it was a dull morning, I liked my room even less than the night before. There was nothing in it bright or fresh, though I daresay it had looked much nicer, years before, when Cousin Agnes was a little girl, for the cretonne curtains must once have been very pretty, with bunches of pink roses, which now, however, were faded, as well as the carpet on the floor, and the paper on the walls, to an over-all dinginess such as you never see in a country room even when everything in it is old.

I sat down on a chair and looked about me disconsolately. Belinda had unpacked my clothes and arranged them after her fashion. My other possessions were still untouched, but I did not feel as if I cared to do anything with them.

'I shall never be at home here,' I said to myself, 'but I suppose I must just try to bear it for the time, for grandmamma's sake.'

Silly child that I was, as if grandmamma ever thought of herself, or her own likes and dislikes, before what she considered right and good for me.

But the idea of being something of a martyr pleased me. I got out my work, not my fancy-work—I was in a mood for doing disagreeable things—but some plain sewing that I had not touched for some time, and took it downstairs to the library. I heard voices as I opened the door, grandmamma was sitting at the writing-table speaking to the cook, who stood beside her, a rather fat, pleasant-looking woman, who made a little curtsey when she saw me. But grandmamma looked up, for her, rather sharply—

'Why, have you finished upstairs already, Helena?' she said. 'You had better go into the dining-room for a few minutes, I am busy just now.'

I went away immediately, but I was very much offended, it just seemed the beginning of what I was fancying to myself. The dining-room door was ajar, and I caught sight of the footman looking over some spoons and forks.

'I won't go in there,' I said to myself, and upstairs I mounted again.

On the first landing, where grandmamma's room was, there were several other doors. All was perfectly quiet—there seemed no servants about, so I thought I would amuse myself by a little exploring.

The first room I peeped into was large—larger than grandmamma's, but all the furniture was covered up. The only thing that interested me was a picture in pastelles hanging up over the mantelpiece. It caught my attention at once, and I stood looking up at it for some moments.

CHAPTER XI

AN ARRIVAL

It was the portrait of a young girl,—a very sweet face with soft, half-timid looking eyes.

'I wonder who it is,' I thought to myself, 'I wonder if it is Mrs. Vandeleur. If it is, she must be nice. I almost think I should like her very much.'

A door in this room led into a dressing-room, which next caught my attention. Here, too, the only thing that struck me was a portrait. This time, a photograph only, of a boy. Such a nice, open face! For a moment or two I thought it must be Cousin Cosmo, but looking more closely I saw written in one corner the name 'Paul' and the date 'July 1865.' I caught my breath, as I said to myself—

'It must be papa! I wonder if granny knows—she has none of him as young as that, I am sure. Oh, dear, how I do wish he was alive!'

But it was with a softened feeling towards both of my unknown cousins that I stepped out on to the landing again.

It did seem as if Mr. Vandeleur must have been very fond of my father for him to have kept this photograph all these years, hanging up where he must see it every time he came into his room.

Unluckily, just as I was thinking this, Belinda made her appearance through a door leading on to the backstairs.

'What are you doing here, miss?' she said. 'I don't think Hales would be best pleased to find you wandering about through these rooms.'

'I don't know what you mean,' I said, frightened, yet indignant too. 'I was only looking at the pictures. In grandmamma's house at home I go into any room I like.'

She gave a little laugh.

'Oh, but you see, miss, you are not at your own home now,' she said, 'that makes all the difference,' and she passed on, closing the door I had left open, as if to say, 'you can't go in there again!'

I made my way up to my own room, all the doleful feelings coming back.

'Really,' I said, as I curled myself up at the foot

of the bed, 'there seems no place for me in the world, it's "move on—move on," like the poor boy in the play grandmamma once told me about.'

And I sat there in the cold, nursing my bitter and discontented thoughts, as if I had nothing to be grateful or thankful for in life.

Grandmamma did not come up to look for me, as in my secret heart I think I hoped she would. She was very, very busy, busier than I could have understood if she had told me about it, for though he did not at all mean to put too much upon her, Mr. Vandeleur had such faith in her good sense and judgment, that he had left everything to be settled by her when we came.

I do not know if I fell asleep; I think I must have dozed a little, for the next thing I remember is rousing up, and feeling myself stiff and cramped, and not long after that the gong sounded again. I got down from my bed and looked at myself in the glass; my face seemed very pinched and miserable. I made my hair neat and washed my hands, for I would not have dared to go downstairs untidy to the dining-room. But I was not at all sorry when grandmamma looked at me anxiously, exclaiming—

'My dear child, how white you are! Where

have you been, and what have you been doing with yourself?'

'I've been up in my own room,' I said, and just then grandmamma said nothing more, but when we were alone again she spoke to me seriously about the foolishness of risking making myself ill for no reason.

'There *is* reason,' I said crossly, 'at least there's no reason why I shouldn't be ill; nobody cares how I am.'

For all answer grandmamma drew me to her and kissed me.

'My poor, silly, little Helena,' she said.

I was touched and ashamed, but irritated also; grandmamma understood me better than I understood myself.

'We are going out now,' she said, 'put on your things as quickly as you can. I have several shops to go to, and the afternoons close in very early in London just now.'

That walk with grandmamma—at least it was only partly a walk, for she took a hansom to the first shop she had to go to,—and I had never been in a hansom before, so you can fancy how I enjoyed it—yes, that first afternoon in London stands out very happily. Once I had grandmamma quite to

myself everything seemed to come right, and I could almost have skipped along the street in my pleasure and excitement. The shops were already beginning to look gay in anticipation of Christmas, to me—country child that I was, they were bewilderingly magnificent. Grandmamma was careful not to let me get too tired, we drove home again in another hansom, carrying some of our purchases with us. These were mostly things for the house, and a few for ourselves, and shopping was so new to me, that I took the greatest interest even in ordering brushes for the housemaid, or choosing a new afternoon tea-service for Cousin Agnes.

That evening, too, passed much better than the morning. Grandmamma spoke to me about how things were likely to be and what I myself should try to do.

'I cannot fix anything about lessons for you,' she said, 'till after Cosmo and Agnes return, for I do not know how much time I shall have free for you. But you are well on for your age, and I don't think a few weeks without regular lessons will do you any harm, especially here in London, where there is so much new and interesting. But I think you had better make a plan for yourself—I will help you

with it—for doing something every morning while I am busy.'

'But I may be with you in the afternoons, mayn't I?' I said.

'Of course, at least generally,' said grandmamma, 'whenever the weather is fine enough I will take you out. It would never do to shut you up when you have been so accustomed to the open air. Some days, perhaps, we may go out in the mornings. All I want you to understand now, is that plans cannot possibly be settled all at once. You must be patient and cheerful, and if there are things that you don't like just now, in a little while they will probably disappear.'

I felt pleased at grandmamma talking to me more in her old consulting way, and for the time it seemed as if I could do as she wished without difficulty.

And for some days and even weeks things went on pretty well. I used to get cross now and then when grandmamma could not be with me as much as I wanted, but so far, there was no *person* to come between her and me, it was only her having so much to do; and whenever we were together she was so sweet and understanding in every way, that it made up for the lonely hours I sometimes had to spend.

But in myself I am afraid there was not really any improvement, it was only on the surface. There was still the selfishness underneath, the readiness to take offence and be jealous of anything that seemed to put me out of my place as first with grandmamma. All the unhappy feelings were there, smouldering, ready to burst out into fire the moment anything stirred them up.

Christmas came and went. It was very unlike any of the Christmases I had ever known, and of course it could not but seem rather lonely. Grandmamma still had some old friends in London, but she had not tried to see them, as she had been so busy, and not knowing as yet when Cousin Agnes would be returning. It seemed a sort of waiting time altogether. Now and then grandmamma would allude cheerfully to Cousin Cosmo and his wife coming home, hoping that it would be soon, as every letter brought better accounts of Mrs. Vandeleur's health. I certainly did not share in these hopes, I would rather have gone on living for ever as we were if only I could have had grandmamma to myself.

I think it was about the 8th of January that there came one morning a letter which made grandmamma look very grave, and when she had finished

reading it she sat for a moment or two without speaking. Then she said, as if thinking aloud—

'Dear me, this is very disappointing.'

'Is anything the matter?' I asked. 'Can't you tell me what it is, grandmamma?'

'Oh yes, dear,' she said, 'it is only what I have been looking forward to so much—but it has come in such a different way. Your cousins are returning almost immediately, but only, I am sorry to say, because poor Agnes is so ill that the London doctor says she must be near him. They are bringing her up in an invalid carriage the first mild day, so I must have everything ready for them. It will probably be many weeks before she can leave her room,' and poor grandmamma sighed.

This news was far from welcome to me, but I am afraid what I cared for had only to do with myself. I didn't feel very sorry for poor Cousin Agnes. Partly, perhaps, because I was too young to understand how seriously ill she was, but chiefly, I am afraid, because I immediately began to think how much of grandmamma's time would be taken up by her, and how dull it would be for me in consequence. And when grandmamma turned to me and said—

'I'm sure I shall find you a help and comfort, Helena,' it almost startled me.

I murmured something about wishing there was anything I could do, and I did feel ashamed.

'I'm afraid there will not be much for you actually to do,' said grandmamma, 'and I don't think you need warning to be very quiet in a house with an invalid. You are never noisy,' and she smiled a little; 'but you must try to be bright and not to mind if for a little while you have to be left a good deal to yourself. I must speak to Hales about going out with you sometimes, for you must have a walk every day.'

And within a week of receiving this bad news there came one morning a telegram to say that Mr. and Mrs. Vandeleur would be arriving that afternoon.

'Oh, dear, dear,' I thought to myself when I heard it. 'I wish I were—oh, anywhere except here!'

I spent the hours till luncheon—which was of course my dinner—as usual, doing some lessons and needlework. Hitherto, grandmamma had corrected my lessons in the evening.

'I don't believe she'll have time to look over my exercises now,' I thought to myself, 'but I suppose I must go on doing them all the same.'

I have forgotten to say that I did my lessons at a side table in the dining-room, where there was always a large fire burning. It did not seem worth while to have another room given up to me while grandmamma and I were alone in the house.

I did not see grandmamma till luncheon, and then she told me that she was obliged to go out immediately to some distance, as Mrs. Vandeleur's invalid couch or table, I forget which, was not the kind ordered.

'But mayn't I come with you?' I asked.

Grandmamma shook her head. No, she was in a great hurry, and the place she was going to was in the city, it would do me no good, and it was a damp, foggy day. I might go into the Square garden for a little if I would promise to come in at once if it rained.

There was nothing very inviting in this prospect. I liked the Square gardens well enough to walk up and down in with grandmamma, but alone was a very different matter. Still, it was better than staying in all the afternoon. And I spent an hour or more in pacing along the paths enjoying my self-pity to the full.

There were a few other children playing together; how I envied them!

'If I had even a little dog,' I said to myself, 'it would be something. But of course there's no chance of that—he would disturb Cousin Agnes.'

I went back to the house an hour or so before the expected arrival. Grandmamma had already returned. She was in her own room, I peeped in on my way upstairs.

'What do you want me to do, grandmamma?' I said.

She glanced at me.

'Change your frock, dear, and come down to the library with your work. Of course Cosmo will want to see you, once Cousin Agnes is settled in her room. Dear me, I do hope she will have stood the journey pretty well!'

I came downstairs again with mixed feelings. I should rather have enjoyed making a martyr of myself by staying up in my own room. But, on the other hand, I had a good deal of curiosity on the subject of my unknown cousins.

'I wonder if Cousin Agnes will be able to walk,' I thought to myself, 'or if they will carry her in. I should like to see what an invalid carriage is like!'

I think I pictured to myself a sort of palanquin, and eager to be on the spot at the moment of the

arrival I changed my frock very quickly and hastened downstairs with my knitting in my hand—a model of propriety.

'Do I look nice, grandmamma?' I asked. 'It is the first time I have had this frock on, you know.'

For besides the new clothes grandmamma had ordered from Windy Gap, she had got me some very nice ones since we came to London. And this new one I thought the prettiest of all. It was brown velveteen with a falling collar of lace, with which I was especially pleased, for though my clothes had been always very neatly made, they had been very plain, the last two or three years more especially. So I stood there pleasantly expecting grandmamma's approval. But she scarcely glanced at me, I doubt if she heard what I said, for she was busy writing a note about something or other which had been forgotten, and almost as I spoke the footman came into the room to take it.

'What were you saying, my dear?' she said quickly. 'Oh yes, very nice——Be sure, William, that this is sent at once.'

I crossed the room and sat down in the farthest corner, my heart swelling. It was not *all* spoilt temper, I was really terribly afraid that grandmamma

was beginning to care less for me. But before there had been time for her to notice my disappointment, there came the sound of wheels stopping at the door, and then the bell rang loudly. Grandmamma started up. If I had been less taken up with myself, I could easily have entered into her feelings. It was the first time for more than twelve years that she had seen her nephew, and think of all that had happened to her since then! But none of these thoughts came into my mind just then, it was quite filled with myself and my own troubles, and but for my curiosity I think I would have hidden myself behind the window-curtains.

Grandmamma went out into the hall and I followed her. The door was already opened, as the servants had been on the look-out.

The first thing I saw was a tall, slight figure coming very slowly up the steps on the arm of a dark, grave-looking man. Behind them came a maid laden with shawls and cushions. They came quietly into the hall, grandmamma moving forward a little to meet them, though without speaking.

A smile came over Cousin Agnes's pale face as she caught sight of her, but Mr. Vandeleur looked up almost sharply.

'Wait till we get her into the library,' he said.

Evidently coming up those few steps had almost been too much for his wife, for I saw her face grow still paler. I was watching with such interest that I quite forgot that where I stood I was partially blocking up the doorway. Without noticing who I was, so completely absorbed was he with Cousin Agnes, Mr. Vandeleur stretched out his hand and half put me aside.

'Take care,' he said quickly, and before there was time for more—'Helena, do get out of the way,' said grandmamma.

That was the last straw for me. I did get out of the way. I turned and rushed across the hall, and upstairs to my own room without a word.

CHAPTER XII

A CATASTROPHE

No one came up to look for me ; I don't know that I expected it, but still I was disappointed and made a fresh grievance of this neglect, as I considered it. The truth was, nobody was thinking of me at all, for Cousin Agnes had fainted when she got into the library and everybody was engrossed in attending to her.

Afternoon tea time came and passed, and still I was alone. It was quite dark when at last Belinda came up to draw down the blinds, and was startled by finding me in my usual place when much upset —curled up at the foot of the bed.

'Whatever are you doing here, miss?' she said, sharply. 'There's your tea been waiting in the dining-room for ever so long.'

The fact was, she had been told to call me but had forgotten it.

'I don't want any,' I said, shortly.

'Nonsense, miss,' said the girl, 'you can't go without eating. And when there's any one ill in the house you must just make the best of things.'

'Mrs. Vandeleur didn't seem so very ill,' I said, 'she was able to walk.'

'Ah, but she's been worse since then—they had to fetch the doctor, and now she's in bed and better, and your grandmamma's sitting beside her.'

I did feel sorry for Cousin Agnes when I heard this, though the sore feeling still remained that I wasn't wanted, and was of no use to any one. I was almost glad to escape seeing grandmamma, so I went downstairs quietly to the dining-room and had my tea, for I was very hungry. Just as I had finished, and was crossing the hall to go upstairs again, a tall figure came out of the library. I knew in a moment who it was, but Cousin Cosmo stared at me as if he couldn't imagine what child it could be, apparently at home in his house.

'Who—what?' he began, but then corrected himself. 'Oh, to be sure,' he added, holding out his hand, 'you're Helena of course. I wasn't sure if you were at school or not.'

'At school,' I repeated, 'grandmamma would never send me to school.'

He smiled a little, or meant to do so, but I thought him very grim and forbidding.

'I don't wonder at those boys not liking him for their guardian,' I said to myself as I looked up at him.

'Ah, well,' he replied, 'so long as you remember to be a very quiet little girl, especially when you pass the first landing, I daresay it will be all right.'

I didn't condescend to answer, but walked off with my most dignified air, which no doubt was lost upon my cousin, who, I fancy, had almost forgotten my existence before he had closed the hall door behind him, for he was just going out.

I did not see grandmamma that evening, and I did not know that she saw me, for when she at last was free to come up to my room, I was in bed and fast asleep, and she was careful not to wake me. She told me this the next morning, and also that Belinda had said I had had my tea and supper comfortably. But—partly from pride, and partly from better motives—I did not tell her that I had cried myself to sleep.

I need not go into the daily history of the next few weeks, indeed I don't wish to do so. They were the most miserable time of my whole life. Now

that all is happy I don't want to dwell upon them. Dear grandmamma says, whenever we do speak about that time, that she really does not think it was *all* my fault, and that comforts me. It was certainly not her fault, nor anybody's in one way, except of course mine. Things happened in a trying way, as they must do in life sometimes, and I don't think it was wrong of me to feel unhappy. We *have* to be unhappy sometimes; but it was wrong of me not to bear it patiently, and to let myself grow bitter, and worst of all, to do what I did—what I am now going to tell about.

Those dreary weeks went on till it was nearly Easter, which came very early that year. After my cousins' return home the weather got very bad and added to the gloom of everything.

It was not so very cold, but it was *so* dull! Fog more or less, every day, and if not fog, sleety rain, which generally began by trying to be snow, and for my part I wished it had been—it would have made the streets look clean for a few hours.

There were lots of days on which I couldn't go out at all, and when I did go out, with Belinda as my companion, I did not enjoy it. She was a silly, selfish girl, though rather good-natured once she felt

I was in some way dependent on her, but her ideas of amusing talk were not the same as mine. The only shop-windows she cared to look at were milliners' and drapers', and she couldn't understand my longing to read the names of the tempting volumes in the booksellers, and feeling so pleased if I saw any of my old friends among them.

Indoors, my life was really principally spent in my own room, where, however, I always had a good big fire, which was a comfort. There were many days on which I scarcely saw grandmamma, a few on which I actually did not see her at all. For all this time Cousin Agnes was really terribly ill—much worse than I knew—and Mr. Vandeleur was nearly out of his mind with grief and anxiety and self-reproach for having brought her up to London, which he had done rather against the advice of her doctor in the country, who, he now thought, understood her better than the great doctor in London. And grandmamma, I believe, had nearly as much to do in comforting him and keeping him from growing quite morbid, as in taking care of Cousin Agnes. All the improvement in her health which they had been so pleased at during the first part of the winter had gone, and I now know that for a great part of

those weeks there was very little hope of her living. I saw Cousin Cosmo sometimes at breakfast but never at any other hour of the day, unless I happened to pass him on the staircase, which I avoided as much as possible, you may be sure, for if he did speak to me it was as if I were about three years old, and he was sure to say something about being very quiet. I don't think I could have been expected to like him, but I'm afraid I almost hated him then. It would have been better—that is one of the things grandmamma now says—to have told me more of their great anxiety, and it certainly would have been better to send me to school, to some day-school even, for the time.

As it was, day by day I grew more miserable, for you see I had nothing to look forward to, no actual reason for hoping that my life would ever be happier again, for, not knowing but that poor Cousin Agnes might die any day, grandmamma did not like to speak of the future at all.

I never saw her—Cousin Agnes I mean—never except once, but I have not come to that yet. At last, things came to a crisis with me. One day, one morning, Belinda told me that I must not stay in my room as it was to be what she called 'turned

out,' by which she meant that it was to undergo an extra thorough cleaning. She had forgotten to tell me this the night before, so that when I came up from breakfast, which I had had alone, intending to settle down comfortably with my books before the fire, I found there was no fire and everything in confusion.

'What am I to do?' I said.

'You must go down to the dining-room and do your lessons there,' said Belinda. 'There will be no one to disturb you, once the breakfast things are taken away.'

'Has Mr. Vandeleur had his breakfast?' I asked.

'I don't know,' said Belinda, shortly, for she had been told not to tell me that Cousin Agnes had been so ill in the night that the great doctor had been sent for, and they were now having a consultation about her in the library.

'I'll help you to get your things together,' she went on, 'and you must go downstairs as quietly as possible.'

We collected my books. It made me melancholy to see them, there were such piles of exercises grandmamma had never had time to look over! Belinda heaped them all on to the top of my atlas, the glass ink-bottle among them.

'Are they quite steady?' I said. 'Hadn't I better come up again and only take half now?'

'Oh, dear, no,' said Belinda, 'they are right enough if you walk carefully,' for in her heart she knew that she should have helped me to carry them down, herself.

But I had got used to her careless ways, and I didn't seem to mind anything much now, so I set off with my burden. It was all right till I got to the first floor—the floor where grandmamma's and Cousin Agnes's rooms were. Then, as ill luck would have it—just from taking extra care, I suppose—somehow or other I lost my footing and down I went, a regular good bumping roll from top to bottom of one flight of stairs, books, and slate, and glass ink-bottle all clattering after me! I'm quite sure that in all my life before or since I never made such a noise!

I hurt myself a good deal, though not seriously; but before I had time to do more than sit up and feel my arms and legs to be sure that none of them were broken, the library door below was thrown open, and up rushed two or three—at first sight I thought them still more—men! Cousin Cosmo the first.

'In heaven's name,' he exclaimed, though even

Up rushed two or three . . . men, Cousin Cosmo the first.—P. 160.

then he did not speak loudly, 'what is the matter? This is really inexcusable!'

He meant, I think, that there should have been some one looking after me! But I took the harsh word to myself.

'I — I've fallen downstairs,' I said, which of course was easy to be seen. There was a dark pool on the step beside me, and in spite of his irritation Cousin Cosmo was alarmed.

'Have you cut yourself?' he said, 'are you bleeding?' and he took out his handkerchief, hardly knowing why, but as he stooped towards me it touched the stain.

'Ink!' he said, in a tone of disgust. 'Really, even a child might have more sense!'

Then the older of the two men who were with him came forward. He had a very grave but kind face.

'It is very unfortunate,' he said, 'I hope the noise has not startled Mrs. Vandeleur. You must really,' he went on, turning to Cousin Cosmo, but then stopping—'I must have a word or two with you about this before I go. In the meantime we had better pick up this little person.'

I got up of myself, though something in the doctor's face prevented my feeling vexed at his words,

as I might otherwise have been. But just as I was stooping to pick up my books and to hide the giddy, shaky feeling which came over me, a voice from the landing above made me start. It was grandmamma herself; she hastened down the flight of stairs, looking extremely upset.

'Helena!' she exclaimed, and I think her face cleared a little when she saw me standing there, 'you have not hurt yourself then? But what in the world were you doing to make such a terrific clatter? I never knew her do such a thing before,' she went on.

'Did Agnes hear it?' said Cousin Cosmo, sharply.

'I'm afraid it did startle her,' grandmamma replied, 'but fortunately she thought it was something in the basement. I must go back to her at once,' and without another word to me she turned upstairs again.

I can't tell what I felt like; even now I hate to remember it. My own grandmamma to speak to me in that voice and not to care whether I was hurt or not! I think some servant was called to wipe up the ink, and I made my way, stiff and bruised and giddy, to the dining-room—I had not even the refuge of my own room to cry in at peace—while Cousin Cosmo and the doctors went back to the library.

And not long after, I heard the front door close and a carriage drive away.

I thought my cup was full, but it was not, as you shall hear. I didn't try to do any lessons. My head was aching and I didn't feel as if it mattered what I did or didn't do.

'If only my room was ready,' I thought, half stupidly, 'I wouldn't mind so much.'

I think I must have cried a good deal almost without knowing it, for after a while, when the footman came into the room, I started up with a conscious feeling of not wanting to be seen, and turned towards the window, where I stood pretending to look out. Not that there was anything to be seen; the fog was getting so thick that I could scarcely distinguish the railings a few feet off.

The footman left the room again, but I felt sure he was coming back, so I crept behind the shelter of the heavy curtains and curled myself up on the floor, drawing them round me. And then, how soon I can't tell, I fell asleep. It has always been my way to do so when I've been very unhappy, and the unhappier I am the more heavily I sleep, though not in a nice refreshing way.

I awoke with a start, not knowing where I was.

I could not have been asleep more than an hour, but to me it seemed like a whole night, and as I was beginning to collect my thoughts I heard voices talking in the room behind me. It must have been these voices which had awakened me.

The first I heard was Mr. Vandeleur's.

'I am very sorry about it,' he was saying, 'but I see no help for it. I would not for worlds distress you if I could avoid doing so, for all my old debts to you, my dear aunt, are doubled now by your devotion to Agnes. She will in great measure owe her life to you, I feel.'

'You exaggerate it,' said grandmamma, 'though I do believe I am a comfort to her. But never mind about that just now—the present question is Helena.'

'Yes,' he replied, 'I can't tell you how strongly I feel that it would be for the child's good too, though I can quite understand it would be difficult for you to see it in that light.'

'No,' said grandmamma, 'I have been thinking about it myself, for of course I have not been feeling satisfied about her. Perhaps in the past I have thought of her too exclusively, and it is very difficult for a child not to be spoilt by this. And now on the other hand——'

'It is too much for you yourself,' interrupted my cousin, 'she should be quite off your mind. I have the greatest confidence in Dr. Pierce's judgment in such matters. He would recommend no school hastily. If you will come into the library I will give you the addresses of the two he mentioned. No doubt you will prefer to write for particulars yourself; though when it is settled I daresay I could manage to take her there. For even with these fresh hopes they have given us, now this crisis is passed, I doubt your being able to leave Agnes for more than an hour or two at a time.'

'I should not think of doing so,' said grandmamma, decidedly. 'Yes—if you will give me the addresses I will write.'

To me her voice sounded cold and hard; *now* I know of course that it was only the force she was putting upon herself to crush down her own feelings about parting with me.

It was not till they had left the room that I began to understand what a dishonourable thing I had been doing in listening to this conversation, and for a moment there came over me the impulse to rush after them and tell what I had heard. But only for a moment; the dull heavy feeling, which had been

hanging over me for so long of not being cared for, of having no place of my own and being in everybody's way, seemed suddenly to have increased to an actual certainty. Hitherto, it now seemed to me, I had only been playing with the idea, and now as a sort of punishment had come upon me the reality of the cruel truth—grandmamma did *not* care for me any longer. She had got back the nephew who had been like a son to her, and he and his wife had stolen away from me all her love. Then came the mortification of remembering that I was living in Cousin Cosmo's house—a most unwelcome guest.

'He never has liked me,' I thought to myself; 'even at the very beginning, grandmamma never gave me any kind messages from him. And those poor boys Gerard told me of couldn't care for him—he must be horrid.'

Then a new thought struck me. 'I *have* a home still,' I thought; 'Windy Gap is ours, I could live there with Kezia and trouble nobody and hardly cost anything. I won't stay here to be sent to school; I don't think I am bound to bear it.'

I crept out of my corner.

'Surely my room will be ready by now,' I thought, and walking very slowly still, for falling asleep in

the cold had made me even stiffer, I made my way upstairs.

Yes, my room was ready, and there was a good fire. There was a little comfort in that: I sat down on the floor in front of it and began to think out my plans.

CHAPTER XIII

HARRY

In spite of all that was on my mind I slept soundly, waking the next morning a little after my usual hour. Very quickly, so much was it impressed on my brain, I suppose, I recollected the determination with which I had gone to bed the night before.

I hurried to the window and drew up the blind, for I had made one condition with myself—I would not attempt to carry out my plan if the fog was still there! But it had gone. Whether I was glad or sorry I really can't say. I dressed quickly, thinking or planning all the time. When I got downstairs to the dining-room it was empty, but on the table were the traces of some one having breakfasted there.

Just then the footman came in—

'I was to tell you, miss,' he said, 'that Mrs. Wingfield won't be down to breakfast; it's to be taken upstairs to her.'

'And Mr. Vandeleur has had his, I suppose?' I said.

'Yes, miss,' he replied, clearing the table of some of the plates and dishes.

I went on with my breakfast, eating as much as I could, for being what is called an 'old-fashioned' child, I thought to myself it might be some time before I got a regular meal again. Then I went upstairs, where, thanks to Belinda's turn-out of the day before, my room was already in order and the fire lighted. I locked the door and set to work.

About an hour later, having listened till everything seemed quiet about the house, I made my way cautiously and carefully downstairs, carrying my own travelling-bag stuffed as full as it would hold and a brown paper parcel. When I got to the first bed-room floor, where grandmamma's room was, a sudden strange feeling came over me. I felt as if I *must* see her, even if she didn't see me. Her door was ajar.

'Very likely,' I thought, 'she will be writing in there.'

For, lately, I knew she had been there almost entirely, when not actually in Cousin Agnes's room, so as to be near her.

'I will peep in,' I said to myself.

I put down what I was carrying and crept round the door noiselessly. At first I thought there was no one in the room, then to my surprise I saw that the position of the bed had been changed. It now stood with its back to the window, but the light of a brightly burning fire fell clearly upon it. There was some one in bed! Could it be grandmamma? If so, she must be really ill, it was so unlike her ever to stay in bed. I stepped forward a little—no, the pale face with the pretty bright hair showing against the pillows was not grandmamma, it was some one much younger, and with a sort of awe I said to myself it must be Cousin Agnes.

So it was, she had been moved into grandmamma's room a day or two before for a little change.

It could not have been the sound I made, for I really made none, that roused her; it must just have been the *feeling* that some one had entered the room. For all at once she opened her eyes, such very sweet blue eyes they were, and looked at me, at first in a half-startled way, but then with a little smile.

'I thought I was dreaming,' she whispered. 'I have had such a nice sleep. Is that you, little

Helena? I'm so glad to see you; I wanted you to come before, often.'

I stood there trembling.

What would grandmamma or Mr. Vandeleur think if they came in and found me there? But yet Cousin Agnes was so very sweet, her voice so gentle and almost loving, that I felt I could not run out of the room without answering her.

'Thank you,' I said, 'I do hope you are better.'

'I am going to be better very soon, I feel almost sure,' she said, but her voice was already growing weaker. 'Are you going out, dear?' she went on. 'Good-bye, I hope you will have a nice walk. Come again to see me soon.'

'Thank you,' I whispered again, something in her voice almost making the tears come into my eyes, and I crept off as quietly as possible, with a curious feeling that if I delayed I should not go at all.

By this time you will have guessed what my plan was. I think I will not go into all the particulars of how I made my way to Paddington in a hansom, which I picked up just outside the square, and how I managed to take my ticket, a third class one this time, for though I had brought all my money—a few

shillings of my own and a sovereign which Cousin Cosmo had sent me for a Christmas box—I saw that care would be needed to make it take me to my journey's end. Nor, how at last, late in the afternoon, I found myself on the platform at Middlemoor Station.

I was very tired, now that the first excitement had gone off.

'How glad I shall be to get to Windy Gap,' I thought, 'and to be with Kezia.'

I opened my purse and looked at my money. There were three shillings and some coppers, not enough for a fly, which I knew cost five shillings.

'I can't walk all the way,' I said to myself. 'It's getting so late too,' for I had had to wait more than an hour at Paddington for a train.

Then a bright idea struck me. There was an omnibus that went rather more than half-way, if only I could get it I should be able to manage. I went out of the station and there, to my delight, it stood; by good luck I had come by a train which it always met. There were two other passengers in it already, but of course there was plenty of room for me and my bag and my parcel, so I settled myself in a corner, not sorry to see that my companions were

It was all uphill too.—P. 173.

perfect strangers to me. It was now about seven in the evening, the sky was fast darkening. Off we jogged, going at a pretty good pace at first, but soon falling back to a very slow one as the road began to mount. I fancy I dozed a little, for the next thing I remember was the stopping of the omnibus at the little roadside inn, which was the end of its journey.

I got out and paid my fare, and then set off on what was really the worst part of the whole, for I was now very tired and my luggage, small as it was, seemed to weigh like lead. I might have looked out for a boy to carry it for me, but that idea didn't enter my head, and I was very anxious not to be noticed by any one who might have known me.

I seemed to have no feeling now except the longing to be 'at home' and with Kezia. I almost forgot why I had come and all about my unhappiness in London; but, oh dear! how that mile stretched itself out! It was all uphill too; every now and then I was forced to stop for a minute and to put down my packages on the ground so as to rest my aching arms, so my progress was very slow. It was quite dark when at last I found myself stumbling up the bit of steep path which lay between the end of the road where Sharley's pony-cart used to wait and our own little

garden-gate. If I hadn't known my way so well I could scarcely have found it, but at last my goal was reached. I stood at the door for a moment or two without knocking, to recover my breath, and indeed my wits, a little. It all seemed so strange, I felt as if I were dreaming. But soon the fresh sweet air, which was almost like native air to me, made me feel more like myself—made me realise that here I was again at dear old Windy Gap. More than that, I would not let my mind dwell upon, except to think over what should be my first words to Kezia.

I knocked at last, and then for the first time I noticed that there was a light in the drawing-room shining through the blinds.

'Dear me,' I thought, 'how strange,' and then a terror came over me—supposing the house was let to strangers! I had quite forgotten that this was possible.

But before I had time to think of what I could in that case do, the door was opened.

'Kezia,' I gasped, but looking up, my new fears took shape.

It was not Kezia who stood there, it was a boy; a boy about two or three years older than I, not as tall as Gerard Nestor, though strong and sturdy

looking, and with—even at that moment I thought so to myself—the very nicest face I had ever seen. He was sunburnt and ruddy, with short dark hair and bright kind-looking eyes, which when he smiled seemed to smile too. I daresay I did not see all that just then, but it is difficult now to separate my earliest remembrance of him from what I noticed afterwards, and there never was, there never has been, anything to contradict or confuse the first feeling, or instinct, that he was as good and true as he looked, my dear old Harry!

Just now, of course, his face had a very surprised expression.

'Kezia?' he repeated. 'I am sorry she is not in just now.'

It was an immense relief to gather from his words that she was not away.

'Will she be in soon?' I said, eagerly; 'I didn't know there was any one else in the house. May I—do you mind—if I come in and wait till Kezia returns?'

'Certainly,' said the boy, and as he spoke he stooped to pick up the bag and parcel which his quick eyes had caught sight of. 'My brother and I are staying here,' he said, as he crossed the little

hall to the drawing-room door. 'We are alone here except for Kezia; we came here a fortnight ago from school, it was broken up because of illness.'

I think he went on speaking out of a sort of friendly wish to set me at my ease, and I listened half stupidly, I don't think I quite took in what he said. A younger boy was sitting in my own old corner, by the window, and a little table with a lamp on it was drawn up beside him.

'Lindsay,' said my guide, and the younger boy, who was evidently very well drilled by his brother, started up at once. 'This—this young lady,' for by this time he had found out I was a lady in spite of my brown paper parcel, 'has come to see Kezia. Put some coal on the fire, it's getting very low.'

Lindsay obeyed, eyeing me as he did so. He was smaller and slighter than his brother, with fair hair and a rather girlish face.

'Won't you sit down?' said Harry, pushing a chair forward to me.

I was dreadfully tired and very glad to sit down, and now my brain began to work a little more quickly. The name 'Lindsay' had started some recollection.

'Are you—' I began, 'is your name Vandeleur; are you the boys at school with Gerard Nestor?'

'Yes,' said Harry, opening his eyes very wide, 'and—would you mind telling me who you are?' he added bluntly.

'I'm Helena Wingfield,' I said. 'This is my home. I have come back alone, all the way from London, because——' and I stopped short.

'Because?' repeated Harry, looking at me with his kind, though searching eyes. Something in his manner made me feel that I must answer him. He was only a boy, not nearly as 'grown-up' in manners or appearance as Gerard Nestor; there was something even a little rough about him, but still he seemed at once to take the upper hand with me; I felt that I must respect him.

'Because—' I faltered, feeling it very difficult to keep from crying—'because I was so miserable in London in your—in Cousin Cosmo's house. He is my cousin, you know,' I went on, 'though his name is different.'

'I know,' said Harry, quietly, 'he's our cousin too, and our guardian. But you're better off than we are—you've got your grandmother. I know all about you, you see. But how on earth did she let you come away like this alone? Or is she—no, she can't be with you, surely?'

'No,' I replied, 'I'm alone, I thought I told you so; and grandmamma doesn't know I've come away, of course she wouldn't have let me. Nobody does know.'

Harry's face grew very grave indeed, and Lindsay raised himself from stooping over the fire, and stood staring at me as if I was something very extraordinary.

'Your grandmother doesn't know?' repeated Harry, 'nobody knows? How could you come away like that? Why, your grandmother will be nearly out of her mind about you!'

'No, she won't,' I replied, 'she doesn't care for me now, it's all quite different from what it used to be. Nobody cares for me, they'll only be very glad to be rid of the trouble of me.'

The tears had got up into my eyes by this time, and as I spoke they began slowly to drop on to my cheeks. Harry saw them, I knew, but I didn't feel as if I cared, though I think I wanted him to be sorry for me, his kind face looked as if he would be. So I was rather surprised when, instead of saying something sympathising and gentle, he answered rather abruptly—

'Helena, I don't mean to be rude, for of course

it's no business of mine, but I think you must know that you are talking nonsense. I don't mean about Mr. Vandeleur, or any one but your grandmother; but as for saying that she has left off caring for you, that's all—perfectly impossible. *I* know enough for that; you've been with her all your life, and she's been most awfully good to you——'

'I know she has,' I interrupted, 'that makes it all the worse to bear.'

'We'll talk about that afterwards,' said Harry, 'it's your grandmother you should think of now—what do you mean to do?'

I stared at him, not quite understanding.

'I meant to stay here,' I said, 'with Kezia. If I can't—if you count it your house and won't let me stay, I must go somewhere else. But you can't stop my staying here till I've seen Kezia.'

Harry gave an impatient exclamation.

'Can't you understand,' he said, 'that I meant what are you going to do about letting your grandmother know where you are?'

'I hadn't thought about it,' I said; 'perhaps they won't find out till to-morrow morning.'

And then in my indignation I went on to tell him about the lonely life I had had lately, ending up

with an account of my fall down the stairs and what I had overheard about being sent away to school.

'Poor Helena,' said Lindsay.

Harry, too, was sorry for me, I know, but just then he did not say much.

'All the same,' he replied, after listening to me, 'it wouldn't be right to risk your grandmother's being frightened, any longer. I'll send a telegram at once.'

The village post and telegraph office was only a quarter of a mile from our house. Harry turned to leave the room as he spoke.

'Lindsay, you'll look after Helena till I come back,' he said. 'I daresay Kezia won't be in for an hour or so.'

I stopped him.

'You mustn't send a telegram without telling me what you are going to say,' I said.

He looked at me.

'I shall just put—"Helena is here, safe and well,"' he replied, and to this I could not make any reasonable objection.

'I may be safe, but I don't think I am well,' I said grumblingly when he had gone. 'I'm starving, to begin with, I've had nothing to eat all day except

two buns I bought at Paddington Station, and my head's aching dreadfully.'

'Oh, dear,' said Lindsay, who was a soft-hearted little fellow, and most ready to sympathise, especially in those troubles which he best understood, 'you must be awfully hungry. We had our tea some time ago, but Kezia always gives us supper. Come into the kitchen and let's see what we can find—or no, you're too tired—you stay here and I'll forage for you.'

He went off, returning in a few minutes with a jug of milk and a big slice of one of Kezia's own gingerbread cakes. I thought nothing had ever tasted so good, and my headache seemed to get better after eating it and drinking the milk.

I was just finishing when Harry came in again.

'That's right,' he said, 'I forgot that you must be hungry.'

Then we all three sat and looked at each other without speaking.

'Lindsay,' said Harry at last, 'you'd better finish that exercise you were doing when Helena came in,' and Lindsay obediently went back to the table.

I wanted Harry to speak to me. After all I had told him I thought he should have been sorry for me, and should have allowed that I had right on my

side, instead of letting me sit there in silence. At last I could bear it no longer.

'I don't think,' I said, 'that you should treat me as if I were too naughty to speak to. I know quite well that you are not at all fond of Mr. Vandeleur yourself, and that should make you sorry for me.'

'I suppose you're thinking of what Gerard Nestor said,' Harry replied. 'It's true I know very little of Mr. Vandeleur, though I daresay he has meant to be kind to us. But what I can't make out is how you could treat your grandmother so. Lindsay and I have never had any one like what she's been to you.'

His words startled me.

'If I had thought,' I began, 'that she would really care—or be frightened about me—perhaps I—' but I had no time to say more, there came a knock at the front door and Lindsay started up.

'It's Kezia,' he said, 'she locks the back-door when she goes out in the evening and we let her in. She's been to church,' so off he flew, eager to be the one to give her the news of my unexpected arrival.

But I did not rush out to meet her, as I would have done at first. Harry's words had begun to make me a little less sure than I had been as to how even Kezia would look upon my conduct.

CHAPTER XIV

KEZIA'S COUNSEL

THE sound of low voices—Lindsay's and Kezia's, followed by an exclamation, Kezia's of course—reached Harry and me as we stood there in silence looking at each other.

Then the door was pushed open and in hurried my old friend.

'Miss Helena!' she said breathlessly. 'Miss Helena, I could scarce believe Master Lindsay! Dear, dear, how frightened your grandmother will be!'

I could see that it went against her kindly feelings to receive me by blame at the very first, and yet her words showed plainly enough what she was thinking.

'Grandmamma will not be frightened,' I said, rather coldly. 'Harry has sent her a telegram, and besides—I don't think she would have been frightened any way. It's all quite different now,

Kezia, you don't understand. She's got other people to care for instead of me.'

Kezia took no notice of this.

'Dear, dear!' she said again. 'To think of you coming here alone! I'm sure when Master Lindsay met me at the door saying: "Guess who's here, Kezia," I never could have—' but here I interrupted her.

'If that's all you've got to say to me I really don't care to hear it,' I said, 'but it's a queer sort of welcome. I can't go away to-night, I suppose, but I will the very first thing to-morrow morning. I daresay they'll take me in at the vicarage, but really—' I broke off again—'considering that this is my own home, and—and—that I had no one else to go to in all the world except you, Kezia, I do think—' but here my voice failed, I burst into tears.

Kezia put her arms round me very kindly.

'Poor dear,' she said, 'whatever mistakes you've made, you must be tired to death. Come with me into the dining-room, Miss Helena, there's a better fire there, and I'll get you a cup of tea or something, and then you must go to bed. Your own room's quite ready, just as you left it, Master Lindsay has

the little chair-bed in Mr. Harry's room—your grandmamma's room, I mean.'

She led me into the dining-room, talking as she went, in this matter-of-fact way, to help me to recover myself.

Harry and Lindsay remained behind.

'I have had—some—milk, and a piece of—gingerbread,' I said, between my sobs, as Kezia established me in front of the fire in the other room. 'I don't think I could eat anything else, but I'd like some tea very much.'

I shivered in spite of the beautiful big fire close to me.

'You shall have it at once,' said Kezia, hurrying off, 'though it mustn't be strong, and I'll make you a bit of toast, too.'

Then I overheard a little bustle in the kitchen, and by the sounds, I made out that Harry or Lindsay, or both of them perhaps, were helping Kezia in her preparations.

'What nice boys they are,' I thought to myself, and a feeling of shame began to come over me that I should have first got to know them when acting in a way that they, Harry at least, so evidently thought wrong and foolish.

But now that, in spite of her disapproval, I felt myself safe in Kezia's care, the restraint I had put upon myself gave way more and more. I sat there crying quietly, and when the little tray with tea and a tempting piece of hot toast (which Harry's red face showed he had had to do with) made its appearance I ate and drank obediently, almost without speaking.

Half an hour later I was in bed in my own little room, Kezia tucking me in as she had done so very, very often in my life.

'Now go to sleep, dearie,' she said, 'and think of nothing till to-morrow morning, except that when things come to the worst they begin to get better.'

And sleep I did, soundly and long. Harry and Lindsay had had their breakfast two hours before at least, when I woke, and other things had happened. A telegram had come in reply to Harry's, thanking him for it, announcing Mr. Vandeleur's arrival that very afternoon, and desiring Harry to meet him at Middlemoor Station.

They did not tell me of this; perhaps they were afraid it would have made me run off again somewhere else. But when my old nurse brought up my breakfast we had a long, long talk together. I told her all that I had told Harry the night before, and

of course in some ways it was easier for her to understand than it had been for him. I could not have had a better counsellor. She just put aside all I said about grandmamma's not caring for me any longer as simple nonsense; she didn't attempt to explain all the causes of my having been left so much to myself. She didn't pretend to understand it altogether.

'Your grandmamma will put it all right to you, herself, when she sees well to do so,' she said. 'She has just made one mistake, Miss Helena, it seems to me—she has credited you with more sense than perhaps should be expected of a child.'

I didn't like this, and I felt my cheeks grow red.

'More sense,' repeated Kezia, 'and she has trusted you too much. It should have pleased you to be looked on like that, and if you'd been a little older it would have done so. The idea that you could think she had left off caring for you would have seemed to her simply impossible. She has trusted you too much, and you, Miss Helena, have not trusted her at all.'

'But you're forgetting, Kezia, what I heard myself, with my own ears, about sending me away to school, and how little she seemed to care.'

Kezia smiled, rather sadly.

'My dearie,' she said, 'I have not served Mrs. Wingfield all the years I have, not to know her better than that. I daresay you'll never know, unless you live to be a mother and grandmother yourself, what the thought of parting with you was costing her, at the very time she spoke so quietly.'

'But when I fell downstairs,' I persisted, 'she seemed so vexed with me, and then—oh! for days and days before that, I had hardly seen her.'

Kezia looked pained.

'Yes, my dear, it must have been hard for you, but harder for your grandmamma. There are times in life when all does seem to be going the wrong way. And very likely being so very troubled and anxious herself, about you as well as about other things, made your grandmamma appear less kind than usual.'

Kezia stopped and hesitated a little.

'I think as things are,' she said, 'I can't be doing wrong in telling you a little more than you know. I am sure my dear lady will forgive me if I make a mistake in doing so, seeing she has not told you more herself, no doubt for the best of reasons.'

She stopped again. I felt rather frightened.

'What do you mean, Kezia?' I said.

'It is about Mrs. Vandeleur. Do you know, my dear Miss Helena, that it has just been touch and go these last days, if she was to live or die?'

'Oh, Kezia!' I exclaimed; 'no, I didn't know it was as bad as that,' and the tears—unselfish, unbitter tears this time—rushed into my eyes as I remembered the sweet white face that I had seen in grandmamma's room, and the gentle voice that had tried to say something kind and loving to me. 'Oh, Kezia, I wish I had known. Do you think it will have hurt her, my peeping into the room yesterday?' for I had told my old nurse *everything.*

She shook her head.

'No, my dear, I don't think so. She is going to get really better now, they feel sure—as sure as it is ever *right* to feel about such things, I mean. Only yesterday morning I had a letter from your grandmamma, saying so. She meant to tell you soon, all about the great anxiety there had been—once it was over—she had been afraid of grieving and alarming you. So, dear Miss Helena, if you had just been patient a *little* longer——'

My tears were dropping fast now, but still I was not quite softened.

'All the same, Kezia,' I said, 'they meant to send me to school.'

'Well, my dear, if they had, it might have been really for your happiness. You would have been sent nowhere that was not as good and nice a school as could be. And, of course, though Mrs. Vandeleur has turned the corner in a wonderful way, she will be delicate for long—perhaps never quite strong, and the life is lonely for you.'

'I wouldn't mind,' I said, for the sight of sweet Cousin Agnes had made me feel as if I would do anything for her. 'I wouldn't mind, if grandmamma trusted me, and if I could feel she loved me as much as she used. I would do my lessons alone, or go to a day-school or anything, if only I felt happy again with grandmamma.'

'My dearie, there is no need for you to feel anything else.'

'Oh yes—there is *now*, even if there wasn't before,' I said, miserably. 'Think of what I have done. Even if grandmamma forgave me for coming away here, Cousin Cosmo would not—he is *so* stern, Kezia. He really is—you know Harry and Lindsay thought so—Gerard Nestor told us, and though Harry won't speak against him, I can see he doesn't care for him.'

'Perhaps they have not got to know each other,' suggested Kezia. 'Master Harry is a dear boy; but so was Mr. Cosmo long ago—I can't believe his whole nature has changed.'

Then another thought struck me.

'Kezia,' I said, 'I think grandmamma might have told me about the boys being here. She used to tell me far littler things than that. And in a sort of a way I think I had a right to know. Windy Gap is my home.'

'It was all settled in a hurry,' said Kezia. 'The school broke up suddenly through some cases of fever, and poor Mr. Vandeleur was much put about to know where to send the young gentlemen. He couldn't have them in London, with Mrs. Vandeleur so ill, and your grandmamma was very glad to have the cottage free, and me here to do for them. No doubt she would have told you about it. I'm glad for your sake they are here. They'll be nice company for you.'

Her words brought home to me the actual state of things.

'Do you think grandmamma will let me stay here a little?' I said. 'I'm afraid she will not—and even if *she* would, Cousin Cosmo will be so angry,

he'll prevent it. I am quite sure they will send me to school.'

'But what was the use of you coming here then, Miss Helena,' said Kezia, sensibly, 'if you knew you would be sent to school after all?'

'Oh,' I said, 'I didn't think very much about anything except getting away. I—I thought grandmamma would just be glad to be rid of the trouble of me, and that they'd leave me here till Mrs. Vandeleur was better and grandmamma could come home again.'

Kezia did not answer at once. Then she said—

'Do you dislike London so very much, then, Miss Helena?'

'Oh no,' I replied. 'I was very happy alone with grandmamma, except for always thinking they were coming, and fancying she didn't—that she was beginning not to care for me. But—I *am* sorry now, Kezia, for not having trusted her.'

'That's right, my dear; and you'll show it by giving in cheerfully to whatever your dear grandmamma thinks best for you?'

I was still crying—but quite quietly.

'I'll—I'll try,' I whispered.

When I was dressed I went downstairs, not sorry

to feel I should find the boys there. And in spite of the fears as to the future that were hanging over me I managed to spend a happy day with them. They did everything they could to cheer me up, and the more I saw of Harry the more I began to realise how very, very much brighter a life mine had been than his—how ungrateful I had been and how selfish. It was worse for him than for Lindsay, who was quite a child, and who looked to Harry for everything. And yet Harry made no complaints—he only said once or twice, when we were talking about grandmamma, that he did wish she was *their* grandmother, too.

'Wasn't that old lady you lived with before like a grandmother?' I asked.

Harry shook his head.

'We scarcely ever saw her,' he said. 'She was very old and ill, and even when we did go to her for the holidays we only saw her to say good-morning and good-night. On the whole we were glad to stay on at school.'

Poor fellows—they had indeed been orphans.

We wandered about the little garden, and all my old haunts. But for my terrible anxiety, I should have enjoyed it thoroughly.

'Harry,' I said, when we had had our dinner—a very nice dinner, by the bye. I began to think grandmamma must have got rich, for there was a feeling of prosperity about the cottage—fires in several rooms, and everything so comfortable. 'Harry, what do you think I should do? Should I write to grandmamma and tell her—that I am very sorry, and that—that I'll be good about going to school, if she fixes to send me?'

The tears came back again, but still I said it firmly.

'I think,' said Harry, 'you had better wait till to-morrow.'

He did not tell me of Mr. Vandeleur's telegram—for he had been desired not to do so. I should have been still more uneasy and nervous if I had known my formidable cousin was actually on his way to Middlemoor!

CHAPTER XV

'HAPPY EVER SINCE'

LATER in the afternoon—about three o'clock or so—Harry looked at his watch and started up. We were sitting in the drawing-room talking quietly—Harry had been asking me about my lessons and finding out how far on I was, for I was a little tired still, and we had been running about a good deal in the morning.

'Oh,' I said, in a disappointed tone, 'where are you going? If you would wait a little while, I could come out with you again, I am sure.' For I felt as if I did not want to lose any of the time we were together, and of course I did not know how soon grandmamma might not send some one to take me away to school.

And never since Sharley and the others had gone away had I had the pleasure of companions of my own age. There was something about Harry which

reminded me of Sharley, though he was a boy—something so strong and straightforward and *big*, no other word seems to say it so well.

Harry looked at me with a little smile. Dear Harry, I know now that he was feeling even more anxious about me than I was for myself, and that brave as he was, it took all his courage to do as he had determined—I mean to plead my cause with his stern guardian. For Mr. Vandeleur was almost as much a stranger to him as to me.

'I'm afraid I must,' he said, 'I have to go to Middlemoor, but I shall not be away more than an hour and a half. Lindsay—you'll look after Helena, and Helena will look after you and prevent you getting into mischief while I'm away.'

For though Lindsay was a very good little boy, and not wild or rough, he was rather unlucky. I never saw any one like him for tumbling and bumping himself and tearing his clothes.

After Harry had gone, Lindsay got out their stamp album and we amused ourselves with it very well for more than an hour, as there were a good many new stamps to put into their proper places. Then Kezia came in—

'Miss Helena,' she said, 'would you and Master

Lindsay mind going into the other room? I want to tidy this one up a little, I was so long talking with you this morning that I dusted it rather hurriedly.'

We had made a litter, certainly, with the gum-pot and scraps of paper, and cold water for loosening the stamps, but we soon cleared it up.

'Isn't it nearly tea-time?' I said.

'Yes, you shall have it as soon as Master Harry comes in,' said Kezia, 'it is all laid in the dining-room.'

'Oh, well,' said Lindsay, 'we won't do any more stamps this afternoon; come along then, Helena, we'll tell each other stories for a change.'

'You may tell me stories,' I said—'and I'll try to listen,' I added to myself, 'though I don't feel as if I could,' for as the day went on I felt myself growing more and more frightened and uneasy. 'I wish Harry would come in,' I said aloud, 'I think I should write to grandmamma to-day.'

'He won't be long,' said Lindsay, 'Harry always keeps to his time,' and then he began his stories. I'm afraid I don't remember what they were. There were a great many 'you see's' and 'and so's,' but at another time I daresay I would have found them interesting.

He was just in the middle of one, about a trick some of the boys had played an undermaster at their school, when I heard the front door open quietly and steps cross the hall. The steps were of more than one person, though no one was speaking.

'Stop, Lindsay,' I said, and I sat bolt up in my chair and listened.

Whoever it was had gone into the drawing-room. Then some one came out again and crossed to the kitchen.

'Can it be Harry?' I said.

'There's some one with him if it is,' said Lindsay.

I felt myself growing white, and Lindsay grew red with sympathy. He *is* a very feeling boy. But we both sat quite still. Then the door opened gently, and some one looked in, but it wasn't Harry, it was Kezia.

'Miss Helena, my love,' she said, 'there's some one in the drawing-room who wants to see you.'

'Who is it?' I asked, breathlessly, but my old nurse shook her head.

'You'll see,' she said.

My heart began to beat with the hope—a silly, wild hope it was, for of course I might have known she could not yet have left Cousin Agnes—that it

might be grandmamma. And, luckily perhaps, for without it I should not have had courage to enter the drawing-room, this idea lasted till I had opened the door, and it was too late to run away.

How I did wish I could do so you will easily understand, when I tell you that the tall figure standing looking out of the window, which turned as I came in, was that of my stern Cousin Cosmo himself!

I must have got very white, I think, though it seemed to me as if all the blood in my body had rushed up into my head and was buzzing away there like lots and lots of bees, but I only remember saying 'Oh!' in a sort of agony of fear and shame. And the next thing I recollect was finding myself on a chair and Cousin Cosmo beside me on another, and, wonderful to say, he was holding my hand, which had grown dreadfully cold, in one of his. His grasp felt firm and protecting. I shut my eyes just for a moment and fancied to myself that it seemed as if papa were there.

'But it can't last,' I thought, 'he's going to be awfully angry with me in a minute.'

I did not speak. I sat there like a miserable little criminal, only judges don't generally hold

prisoners' hands when they are going to sentence them to something very dreadful, do they? I might have thought of that, but I didn't. I just squeezed myself together to bear whatever was coming.

This was what came.

I heard a sort of sigh or a deep breath, and then a voice, which it almost seemed to me I had never heard before, said, very, very gently—

'My poor little girl—poor little Helena. Have I been such an ogre to you?'

I could *scarcely* believe my ears—to think that it was Cousin Cosmo speaking to me in that way! I looked up into his face; I had really never seen it very well before. And now I found out that the dark, deep-set eyes were soft and not stern—what I had taken for hardness and severity had, after all, been mostly sadness and anxiety, I think.

'Cousin Cosmo,' I said, 'are you going to forgive me, then? And grandmamma, too? *I am* sorry for running away, but I didn't understand properly. I will go to school whenever you like, and not grumble.'

My tears were dropping fast, but still I felt strangely soothed.

'Tell me more about it all,' said Mr. Vandeleur.

'I want to understand from yourself all about the fancies and mistakes there have been in your head.'

'Would you first tell me,' I said, 'how Cousin Agnes is? It was a good deal about her I didn't understand?'

'Much, much better,' he replied, 'thank God. She is going to be almost well again, I hope.'

And then, before I knew what I was about, I found myself in the middle of it all—telling him everything—the whole story of my unhappiness, more fully even than I had told it to Harry and Kezia, for though he did not say much, the few words he put in now and then showed me how wonderfully he understood. (Cousin Cosmo *is* a very clever man.)

And when at last I left off speaking, *he* began and talked to me for a long time. I could never tell if I tried, *how* he talked—so kindly, and nicely, and rightly—putting things in the right way, I mean, not making out it was *all* my fault, which made me far sorrier than if he had laid the whole of the blame on me.

I always do feel like that when people, especially big people, are generous in that sort of way. One thing Cousin Cosmo said at the end which I must tell.

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of its own, but I am afraid my aunt and you must have found it very cold and exposed in bad weather?'

'Sometimes,' I said; 'the last winter here was pretty bad.'

'Yes,' he answered, 'it is not a place for the middle of winter,' but that was all he said.

I was turning to leave the room when another thought struck me.

'Cousin Cosmo,' I asked timidly, 'will grandmamma want me to go to school very soon?'

He smiled, rather a funny smile.

'Put it out of your mind till I go back to London, and talk things over,' he replied. 'I want all of us to be as happy as possible this evening. Send Harry in here for a moment.'

I met Harry outside in the hall.

'Is it all right?' he said, anxiously.

'Oh, Harry,' I said, 'I can scarcely believe he's the same! He's been so awfully kind.'

That evening *was* a very happy one. Cousin Cosmo was interested about everything at Windy Gap, and after supper he talked to Harry and me of all sorts of things, and promised to send us down some books, which pleased me, as it did seem as

if he must mean me to stay where I was for a few days at any rate.

Still, I did not feel, of course, quite at rest till I had written a long, long letter to grandmamma and heard from her in return. I need not repeat all she said about what had passed—it just made me feel more than ever ashamed of having doubted her and of having been so selfish.

But what she said at the end of her letter about the plans she and Cousin Cosmo had been making was almost too delightful. I could scarcely help jumping with joy when I read it.

'Harry,' I called out, 'I'm not to go to school at all, just fancy! I'm to stay here with you and Lindsay till you go back to school — till a few days before, I mean, and we're to travel to London together and be all at Chichester Square. Cousin Agnes and grandmamma are going away to the sea-side now immediately, but they'll be back before we come. Cousin Agnes is so much better!'

Harry did not look quite as pleased as I was—about the London part of it.

'I'm awfully glad you're going to stay here,' he answered; 'and I do want to see your grandmother.

I suppose it'll be all right,' he went on, 'and that they won't find Lindsay and me a nuisance in London.'

I was almost vexed with him.

'Harry,' I said, 'don't *you* begin to be fanciful. You don't *know* how Cousin Cosmo spoke of you the other day.'

And after all it did come all right. My story finishes up like a fairy-tale—'They lived happy ever after!'

Well no, not quite that, for it is not yet four years since all this happened, and four years would be a very short 'ever after.'

But I may certainly say we have lived most happily ever since that time till now.

Cousin Agnes is much, much better. She never will be quite strong—never a very strong person, I mean. But she is *so* sweet, our boys and I often think we should scarcely like her to be any different in any way from what she is, though of course not really ill or suffering.

And 'our boys'—yes, that is what they are—dear brothers to me, just like real ones, and just like grandsons to dear, dear grandmamma. They come to Chichester Square regularly for their holidays—it

is their 'new home,' as it is mine. But we have another home—and it is not much of the holidays except the Christmas ones that we—grandmamma and we three—spend in London.

For Windy Gap is still ours—and Kezia lives there and is always ready to have us—and Cousin Cosmo has built on two or three more rooms, and our summers there are just *perfect!*

The Nestors came back to Moor Court long ago, and I see almost as much of them as in the old days, as they now come to their London house every year for some months, and we go to several classes together, though I have a daily governess as well.

Next year Sharley is to 'come out.' Just fancy! I am sure every one will think her very pretty. But not many can know as well as I do that her face only tells a very small part of her beauty. She is so very, very good.

I daresay you will wonder how Cousin Cosmo—grave, stern Cousin Cosmo—likes it all. His quiet solemn house the home of three adopted children, who are certainly not solemn, and not always 'quiet' by any means.

I can only tell you that he said to grandmamma

not very long ago, and she told me, and I told Harry — that he had 'never been so happy since he was a boy himself,' all but a son to her and a brother to 'Paul'—that was my father, you know.

THE END

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